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AT WAR IN THE SHADOW OF VIETNAM:
UNITED STATES MILITARY AID TO THE ROYAL LAO GOVERNMENT 1955-75

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OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN HISTORY

MAY 1991

By

Timothy Neil Castle

Dissertation Committee:

Truong Buu Lam, Chairperson

Richard H. Immerman

Stephen Uhalley, Jr.

Jerry H. Bentley

Thomas W. Gething

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DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

Wesley Hunt
Chairperson

Robert L. J.
Thomas W. Kelly

James H. B. T.

John A. B.

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Attaining reading proficiency in two foreign languages was an important milestone in my graduate education. I will always be appreciative to my Lao teacher, Deth Soulatha, and my French tutor, Patricia Lane. Their patience, skill, and friendship sustained me through some very frustrating times.

My dissertation committee allowed me an enormous amount of flexibility to pursue a very contemporary and controversial topic. I have learned a great deal from Dr. Truong Buu Lam, Dr. Stephen Uhalley, and Dr. Jerry H. Bentley. Dr. Thomas W. Gething, one of the busiest men I have ever known, never failed to make time for me. The University of Hawaii will never have a more professional and caring Dean of Students. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Richard H. Immerman. His excellence as a teacher and writer, availability for counsel, good humor, and commitment to a greater understanding of America's role in Southeast Asia, made this work a reality.

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Leary, University of Georgia, provided timely and detailed feedback and has allowed me to use some of his own research findings. Colonel Michael S. Elliott brought to this project an extensive knowledge of Thailand and exceptional writing skills. Dr. Timothy W. Wright, longtime Department of Defense Southeast Asia specialist, supplied invaluable insights on the peoples and geography of Southeast Asia. Major Anthony J. Litvinas contributed a critical eye and his own recollections of life in wartime Laos.

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America documents at the University of Texas at Dallas. Professor Douglas Pike, University of California, Berkeley, discussed with me the resources of the Indochina Archive and directed me toward very worthwhile material. Dr. Jay Smith at the Office of Pacific Air Forces History and Mr. Donald J. Barrett, U.S. Air Force Academy library, assisted me in obtaining some very useful declassified documents.

Personal recollections proved to be an invaluable source of information. Ambassador Leonard Unger spent several hours with me on two occasions explaining the various American and Laotian personalities as well as the diplomatic complexities of his many years in Laos and Thailand. Ambassador William H. Sullivan, although living in Mexico and frequently traveling abroad, responded promptly to all my letters and graciously offered to answer any follow-up questions. Even though we disagree on a number of points, Ambassador Sullivan's interest and support for this project has been especially noteworthy. Ambassador G. Murtrie Godley and his niece Jinny St. Goar met with me during a State Department sponsored conference on Laos and recommended a number of useful sources of information. Ambassador Charles S. Whitehouse agreed to see me on short notice and provided an informative overview of his assignment in Laos. Ambassador William E. Colby took time away from a very busy schedule to talk with me about the activities of the CIA and Air America in Laos. His comments on guerilla warfare were extremely

valuable. Moreover, in recent years Ambassador Colby has assisted serious researchers by assuring CIA and Air America veterans that they may now discuss their activities in Laos. Professor Walt W. Rostow answered my written queries and was kind enough to send me a copy of a paper he wrote on the Kennedy administration.

Former CIA officials James W. "Bill" Lair, Lloyd "Pat" Landry, and John E. "Jack" Shirley met with me on numerous occasions and recounted many of their responsibilities in Thailand and Laos. I have talked and corresponded with scores of Air America employees. In particular, I would like to thank Leon V. LaShomb, Fred F. Walker, Felix T. Smith, Theodore H. Moore, Thomas G. Jenny, and David H. Hickler. My appreciation also to Continental Air Services pilot James M. MacFarlane who spent hours on my behalf reconstructing search and rescue missions.

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Interviews in the United States with Lao and Hmong war participants added a critical perspective. Although my questions often rekindled painful memories, Major General Vang Pao and his family were very accessible and willing to recount their experiences. Similarly, Major General Kong Le retained his good humor through several lengthy interviews. Yang Teng, Moua Thong, Deth Soulatha, and a number of others who wish anonymity, described the war's impact on the Laotian people.

Preparation for my visit to Thailand and Laos was greatly aided by the suggestions of Professor Joseph J. Zasloff, University of Pittsburgh, photo-journalist Roger Warner, and Dr. Mayoury Ngaosyvathn. Major James P. Waller and Mrs. Doris M. Reed, Air Force Institute of Technology, promptly arranged for the processing of my travel orders and country clearances.

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My successful visit to the Lao People's Democratic Republic involved the concerted efforts of many people. Mr. Charles B. Salmon, U.S. Charge d'Affaires at the American Embassy in Laos and his highly efficient deputy, Mr. Karl E. Wycoff, repeatedly lobbied the Lao government on my behalf. Their actions resulted in my obtaining rare interviews with

a number of senior Lao government officials and unprecedented travel to Xieng Khouang province and the Plain of Jars. Messrs. Salmon and Wycoff also involved me in a number of diplomatic functions and encouraged people from other embassies to share with me their perspectives on Laos. Mr. Salmon's tongue-in-cheek introduction of me as the new Defense Attache surely caused some talk around town. I also enjoyed the hospitality and insights of embassy staffers Wayne R. Boyls and David C. Joyce. The embassy's Laotian employees, many of whom have significant contacts within the Lao government, were always helpful. As the only permanent American diplomatic presence in Indochina, the U.S. Mission in Laos is called upon to perform some of the most important and delicate work in the State Department. Their dedicated and effective efforts deserve greater notice.

Within the Laotian government Sisana Sisane, Chairman of the Social Science Research Committee, pressed the Foreign Ministry to approve my visa and spent several hours with me discussing his wartime experiences. General Khamouan Bouphe, taciturn and insistent on knowing the details of my own military background, was a very difficult person to interview. Nonetheless, he presented me with a very clear picture of life under the American bombing campaigns. General Singkapo Sikhotchounamaly allowed me two interviews and his candid recollections revealed previously unknown information on the fate of U.S. military personnel lost in Laos during the war.

Finally, I want to express my appreciation to the colleagues, friends, and family members who assisted me throughout this long and often difficult period of research and writing. Grateful thanks especially to Joy Elliott, Budd A. Jones, Leon and Betty Eberhard, Iverson Taylor, Lorry M. Fenner, Shella Malolepszy, and Gary G. Allison. To my wife Parinya and children Jason and Jamie, thank you for understanding my strange hours, mood swings, and the closed door to my study. We'll soon make up for the lost time. Lastly, I dedicate this to my mother. My chosen path has included many odd twists and turns, but you have always been there with support and encouragement.

ABSTRACT

A wealth of recently available declassified documents and personal interviews by the author allows an unprecedented review of a major post-World War II U.S. foreign policy issue. This study focuses on America's extraordinary and little known military involvement in the Kingdom of Laos. From 1955 until the Lao Communist takeover in 1975 the United States pursued a highly unorthodox and controversial strategy which charged the Central Intelligence Agency and the Departments of State and Defense with secretly supplying military assistance to this technically neutral country.

Successive administrations developed this remarkable policy in response to Communist violations of the Geneva agreements of 1954 and 1962 and crafted it to avoid overt U.S. violations of the same agreements. The decision spawned a multi-billion dollar U.S. aid program which included a complex military logistics network, a civilian operated airborne resupply and troop movement system, a multi-national ground and air force, and the introduction into Laos of a limited number of U.S. military personnel. Staged primarily from Thailand, the program was made possible by the full cooperation of the Royal Thai government.

This study addresses the following fundamental questions: what were the international, regional, and internal Laotian political and military issues which brought about the Geneva Conferences of 1954 and 1962? How was Laos affected by the

Agreements of 1954 and 1962? What were the specific actions of the United States as a result of these Agreements? What was the role of the Department of Defense, State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development, and the Central Intelligence Agency in these activities and why? How, and for what reasons, was the Royal Thai government involved in this effort? What was the effectiveness of the U.S. military aid programs in terms of security for the Lao government? What were the ultimate effects of this involvement in relation to U.S. objectives in the rest of Southeast Asia? /

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PREFACE

On 2 December 1975, the 600 year old Laotian monarchy was abolished and the Royal Lao government replaced by the Lao People's Democratic Republic. The demise of this small kingdom, in the wake of previous Communist victories in Cambodia and Vietnam, was a bitter conclusion to America's thirty year investment in Southeast Asia. The establishment of a communist government in Laos also ended a highly unorthodox and controversial American strategy which, since 1955, had charged the State Department, the Department of Defense, and the Central Intelligence Agency with secretly supplying military assistance to this technically neutral country.

Successive administrations developed this unprecedented policy in response to communist violations of the Geneva agreements of 1954 and 1962 and crafted it to avoid overt U.S. violations of the same agreements. The decision spawned a multi-billion dollar U.S. aid program which included a complex military logistics network, a civilian operated airborne re-supply and troop movement system, a multi-national ground and air force, and the introduction into Laos of a limited number of U.S. military personnel. Staged primarily from Thailand, the program was made possible by the full cooperation of the Royal Thai government. Remarkably, from 1962 until 1975 the entire operation was commanded by the U.S. Ambassador to Laos. As Admiral John S. McCain, Commander in Chief Pacific Command,

ruefully observed to his staff, "Laos is a SECSTATE [Department of State] theater of war."¹ This dissertation is an attempt to shed light on a secret military aid program which, obscured in the shadow of Vietnam, fueled one of America's unique and little known wars.

This study concentrates on United States military support to the Royal Lao government from the 1962 Geneva Accords, when the covert aid program to Laos was placed under the exclusive control of the U.S. Ambassador, until 1975 when the Communist victory terminated the program. Because the policy's genesis can be traced to 1955, however, I will also review American activities in Laos prior to the 1962 Geneva Accords.

Emphasis will be placed on the organization and responsibilities of Deputy Chief, Joint United States Military Advisory Group Thailand (DEPCHIEF), the covert organization established in 1962 to "carry out, within Thailand, certain necessary military assistance functions for Laos."² I will also address the role of the U.S. military attaches in Laos and the "supplemental personnel" assigned to the attache offices under Project 404. This will include a review of "Waterpump," the U.S. Air Force program established to build a viable Lao air force and the U.S. Air Force Forward Air Controller (FAC) or "Raven" program in Laos. The significant and controversial command relationship which existed between the Deputy Commander, Seventh/Thirteenth Air Force (7/13AF), headquartered in Thailand, and the U.S. Ambassador to Laos

will also be covered.

U.S. military assistance to Laos took many forms and was often undertaken by ostensibly non-military agencies and organizations. An important component of this study is an examination of the USAID Requirements Office (RO) in Laos. Staffed by former U.S. military officers, the RO functioned in the place of a formal Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), which was prohibited by the 1962 Geneva agreements.

The Central Intelligence Agency had extensive and unprecedented responsibilities in the management of military assistance to Laos.³ This study will review, to the extent allowable, the development and employment of CIA operations in support of the Royal Lao government. This will include the activities of the 4802nd Joint Liaison Detachment (JLD), the CIA's headquarters for Laotian operations. In particular, I will examine the relationship between the 4802nd JLD and the Lao irregular army based in northeastern Laos.

The CIA's proprietary airline, Air America, Inc., was established with the 4802nd JLD at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand.⁴ Air America, operating both fixed wing and helicopter aircraft, was assigned some of wartime Southeast Asia's most demanding and dangerous flying. The role of Air America in the supply and movement of troops and refugees, as well as in clandestine missions and search and rescue operations, was a vital component of the overall U.S. effort.⁵

Royal Thai government cooperation was integral to

America's covert aid program to Laos. In addition to providing land for U.S. operated air bases and army facilities, the Thais established a covert military headquarters which assisted in the recruitment and training of Thai soldiers destined for duty in Laos. This study will review the evolution of this U.S.-Thai cooperation and the impact of Thai support on the Lao military assistance program.

Although this is an examination of U.S. military assistance to Laos, I will not concentrate on the massive U.S. air campaigns waged against communist forces and equipment in Laos. Nor will I discuss the activities of U.S. ground forces operating in Laos from South Vietnam or Cambodia. The vast majority of these missions were conducted under the authority and direction of the Commander, United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam (COMUSMACV) and his subordinate commands. Notwithstanding the importance of recognizing the U.S. ambassador's involvement in the selection of bombing targets and authority to disapprove U.S. ground operations in Laos, this study will primarily consider those U.S. activities which directly bolstered the fighting capabilities of the Royal Lao government in the kingdom's critical northeastern region.⁶

An archivally-based history of this period will fill a glaring historiographic lacuna. The body of literature dealing with this subject, and U.S.-Lao relations in general, is embarrassingly deficient. There have been only two

comprehensive scholarly examinations of U.S.-Lao relations during the second Indochina war, Charles A. Stevenson's The End of Nowhere. American Policy Toward Laos since 1954 and Martin E. Goldstein's American Policy Toward Laos.⁷ Both were published in the early 1970's, well before the final years of U.S. involvement in Laos. Moreover, official unclassified sources, critical to any thorough analysis, were especially scarce and difficult to obtain. In his preface Goldstein expressed hope that materials would soon become available. "One suspects ... that presently undisclosed aspects of American participation in Laotian military matters, particularly after 1962, will come to light as time passes and documents become declassified."⁸ Goldstein's optimism has been largely unrewarded.

Researchers of contemporary American history have long labored under the U.S. government's cumbersome and overtaxed declassification program. The security review process for documents dealing with Laos is further compounded by the number of government organizations involved. The military services are generally willing to declassify their holdings on U.S. military involvement in Laos.⁹ There are few operational or weapons secrets contained in Vietnam war era documents. Resistance to declassification of materials dealing with U.S. military involvement in Laos has come primarily from the Central Intelligence Agency and the Department of State. A Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)

request to the CIA, submitted on my behalf by the U.S. Air Force, resulted in not a single piece of information. The CIA responded that under "the provisions of the CIA Information Act ... operational files of the CIA have been exempted from the Freedom of Information Act."¹⁰ Likewise, official requests for Department of State materials have met with polite but firm refusals.

How, then, does one go about researching and reconstructing a subject which has long been such a closely guarded secret? Fortunately, a number of retired CIA and State Department officials have written about their experiences in Laos, and many are willing to discuss the topic with serious researchers. There are also a number of Congressional hearings transcripts and studies which examine State Department and CIA involvement in Laos. Moreover, the roots of this study extend back to my own military service in Southeast Asia. From 1971-1973, as a junior U.S. Air Force enlisted man, I served at Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base in northeastern Thailand. Located a few miles from the Mekong river, and less than seventy-five miles from North Vietnam, the airfield was a constant bustle of helicopters and fixed wing aircraft. During the latter half of my second year I was assigned as an illumination operator on CH-53 helicopters. Although primarily involved in night reconnaissance missions in support of air base defense, I logged thirty-eight combat missions over southern Laos. My

flying unit, the 21st Special Operations Squadron (SOS), was intimately involved in clandestine operations. Although I did not participate in any of these missions, the squadron was often responsible for moving troops and equipment in Laos, North Vietnam, and Cambodia. My service in Southeast Asia has, therefore, provided an important baseline of operational experience and area familiarity with which to approach this subject.

Some of my research tasks, particularly those dealing with classified materials, were simplified because of my present active duty status in the United States Air Force. In particular, I was able to gain access to a substantial body of unprocessed primary data at the Air Force Historical Research Center at Maxwell AFB, Alabama. This included twenty cartons of documents pertaining to the Air Force management of Air America. The oral history collection and the declassified End-of-Tour reports at Maxwell AFB also provided an extraordinary source of information. I also received access to a number of useful files on Laos at the U.S. Army Center for Military History in Washington, D.C. The Office of Air Force History and the Naval Historical Center, both located in Washington, D.C., were helpful with historiographic information.

Materials available at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, Massachusetts and the National Archives in Suitland, Maryland, were generally disappointing. Documents on Laos at

the Kennedy library, for the most part, remain so heavily "sanitized" as to be of negligible value. Exceptions are the recently available oral history program interviews with Ambassador W. Averell Harriman. At the National Archives I was able to locate the U.S. Army record group to which the DEPCHIEF materials had been assigned. However, a search for the records was unsuccessful. According to a knowledgeable archivist, during the transfer of Vietnam era materials from the U.S. Army to the National Archives, a vast amount of data was thoughtlessly destroyed by temporary employees. In all likelihood, the DEPCHIEF files and other important pieces of the Vietnam war puzzle were incinerated.

Lacking a complete data base of officially available materials on U.S. involvement in Laos, I turned to many of the participants for information. This has involved hundreds of letters, scores of telephone calls, and dozens of face to face interviews. I have conducted personal interviews with three of the four men who served as U.S. Ambassador to Laos between 1962 and 1975; Leonard Unger, G. McMurtrie Godley, and Charles S. Whitehouse. The fourth, William H. Sullivan, who resides in Mexico, has graciously answered my letters. Ambassador William E. Colby, former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, was accessible and very helpful. A number of other CIA veterans of the Lao operations have also provided me valuable information. They include two of the principal architects and managers of the 4802nd JLD controlled Thai

support program.

I have had extensive contact with U.S. military personnel who were involved in the Lao aid programs. At the senior command level, I had very productive interviews with two men who served as Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC), Admiral Harry D. Felt (1958-64), and Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp (1964-68). General William C. Westmoreland, Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (1964-68), responded frankly by letter and in a telephone conversation. General John W. Vessey, Jr., who was the first general officer to command DEPCHIEF (1972-73), has provided helpful information. His successor, Lieutenant General Richard G. Trefry (1973-74), has provided invaluable information and support for this project.¹¹ A number of senior Air Force officers who commanded units involved in the Laotian operations have also provided information for this study. Lieutenant General James D. Hughes, Deputy Commander, 7/13th Air Force (1972-73), and Brigadier General Harry C. Aderholt, Commander, Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Thailand (1974-76), and a special operations advisor for the CIA in Laos during the 1960's, were particularly responsive to my research requests.

At an operational level, I have interviewed scores of officers and enlisted men who were associated with the various Lao support operations. This includes U.S. Army and Air Force officers who served in DEPCHIEF, Project 404, the "Raven" program, Operation "Waterpump," and the Defense Attache office

in Laos. I have interviewed and corresponded with dozens of former Air America pilots. Their recollections provide a substantial contribution to this study. Significantly, many of these pilots have chartered an Air America Association and established an Air America documents repository at the University of Texas at Dallas. My visit to this collection uncovered important information on the organization's procedures and regulations.

My other critical source of oral history involves numerous interviews with Thai and Lao participants. I have interviewed a number of senior Royal Lao military officers, including Major General Vang Pao, the commander of the CIA supported irregular army. I have also held a series of discussions with Major General Kong Le, the Lao army officer who staged an extraordinary and short lived coup against his government in August 1960. During my unprecedented research visit to Laos in 1990 I was able to interview two Pathet Lao generals, Singkapo Sikhotchounamaly and Khamouan Bouphe. I also discussed the war years with senior Lao Communist Party official Sisana Sisane.

In Thailand I found that many of the Thai army's most senior officers had served in Laos or were otherwise involved in the U.S. aid program. Interviews were difficult to obtain, mostly for reasons having to do with personal fortunes made during the war. Nevertheless, I did speak with a number of very knowledgeable Thai officers, including General Saiyud

Kerdphol, formerly Supreme Commander of the Thai Armed Forces, and Major General Thammarak Isarangura, Royal Thai Army.

The data I have collected allows me to address fundamental questions, the answers to which have eluded historians. These include: What were the international, regional, and internal Lao political and military issues which brought about the Geneva Conference of 1954? How was Laos affected by the Agreements of 1954? What were the specific actions of the United States as a result of these Agreements? The 1962 Protocol to the Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos prohibited "the introduction of foreign regular and irregular troops, foreign para-military formations and foreign military personnel into Laos." Also prohibited was the "introduction into Laos of armaments, munitions and war material generally, except such quantities of conventional armaments as the Royal Government of Laos may consider necessary for the national defense of Laos."¹² What was the reaction of the United States, the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, North Vietnam, the Royal Lao Government, and the Lao Communists to these restrictions?

Specifically, in the wake of the 1962 prohibitions, what U.S. programs were established to provide military aid to the Royal Lao government? Why? What was the role of the Department of Defense, State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development, and the Central Intelligence Agency in these activities and why? Which organization had ultimate

authority over these operations and why? What was the level of cooperation between the various departments of government? At the in-country level, how were these programs organized and what was the level of direct U.S. involvement? How did the U.S. military aid programs to Laos evolve from 1955 until 1975? What were the major modifications to the programs? How, and for what reasons, was the Royal Thai government involved in this effort? What was the effectiveness of the U.S. military aid programs in terms of security for the Lao government?

In an effort to defend the Lao kingdom and, more importantly, to disrupt the flow of communist arms, materiel, and soldiers traversing Laos en route to South Vietnam, the United States secretly created and administered a billion dollar military aid program to Laos. What were the ultimate effects of this involvement in relation to U.S. objectives in the rest of Southeast Asia?

Arriving at answers to these questions has not been easy. Readers will surely disagree with some, perhaps many of them. They should remember that all of the views and conclusions in this dissertation are mine and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.

ENDNOTES FOR PREFACE

1. My interview (by telephone) with Colonel Peter T. Russell, U.S. Army, retired, Washington, D.C., 13 October 1990. Colonel Russell commanded Deputy Chief, Joint United States Military Advisory Group Thailand (DEPCHIEF), from 1968-71.
2. Department of Defense. Assistant Secretary of Defense. Director of Military Assistance. Letter from General Robert J. Wood, U.S. Army to Major General C. V. Clifton, U.S. Army, Military Aide to the President, 12 September 1962, in the possession of the author. (Hereafter cited as Wood letter).
3. Overseas CIA offices and agents are often referred to as CAS (Controlled American Sources). In Southeast Asia the U.S. military almost always referred to CAS and not CIA. The terms are interchangeable but I shall use CIA.
4. While Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base was the headquarters for Air America operations in Laos and Thailand, the company had other offices and contractual obligations throughout the Far East. The story of Air America's predecessor, Civil Air Transport, as well as early details on Air America can be found in William M. Leary, Perilous Missions: Civil Air Transport and CIA Covert Operations in Asia. University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1984. See also William M. Leary and William Stueck, "The Chennault Plan to Save China: U.S. Containment in Asia and the Origins of the CIA's Aerial Empire, 1949-1950," Diplomatic History 4 (1984): 349-

64. Detailed information regarding the CIA's ownership of Air America can be found in Congress, Senate, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, Foreign and Military Intelligence, Final Report of the Select Committee. Senate Report 94-755, Books I and IV, 94th Cong., 2d sess., 1976. (Hereafter cited as Church Committee Report).

5. Although Air America was the first and largest civilian air carrier working in Laos, it is important to note that there were other air transport companies working within the kingdom. Details on these other organizations will be provided in later chapters.

6. Official accounts of U.S. bombing activities in Southeast Asia may be found in William W. Momyer, Airpower in Three Wars. Washington D.C.: Office of Air Force History, U.S. Air Force, 1985, and Carl Berger, ed., The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia. 2d ed. Washington D.C.: Office of Air Force History, U.S. Air Force, 1984.

7. Martin E. Goldstein, American Policy Toward Laos. Teaneck, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1973, and Charles A. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere: American Policy Toward Laos Since 1954. Boston: Beacon, 1972. There are, however, a number of books which provide excellent surveys of post-World War II Laos. See MacAlister Brown and Joseph J. Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries: The Communist Movement in Laos, 1930-1985. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1986; Arthur

J. Dommen, Conflict in Laos. 2d ed. New York: Praeger, 1971; Arthur J. Dommen, Laos: Keystone of Indochina. Boulder: Westview, 1985; Bernard B. Fall, Anatomy of a Crisis: The Laotian Crisis of 1960-1961. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969; Sisouk Na Champassak, Storm Over Laos. A Contemporary History. New York: Praeger, 1961; Marek Thee, Notes of a Witness: Laos and the Second Indochinese War. New York: Random House, 1973; and Hugh Toye, Laos: Buffer State or Battlefield. 2d ed. New York: Oxford Univeristy Press, 1971.

8. Goldstein, American Policy, 13.

9. Unfortunately, a substantial amount of the U.S. military's Vietnam era holdings have been destroyed. This destruction has resulted from a combination of ignorance, indifference, and efforts to reduce the amount of stored classified materials. My personal observation.

10. Central Intelligence Agency, letter to the author, 20 April 1989.

11. Interestingly enough, two of these men went on to very senior positions in the U.S. government. John W. Vessey, Jr., a brigadier general during his assignment to the organization, rose to four-star rank and served as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. General Vessey is now the President's Special Representative on MIA/POW matters. His successor at DEPCHIEF, Brigadier General Richard G. Trefry, went on to become a lieutenant general and Inspector General of the U.S.

Army. General Trefry serves today as the Military Assistant to the President of the United States.

12. As cited in Agency for International Development, Facts on Foreign Aid to Laos, Embassy of the United States, Vientiane, Laos, April 1971, 26-7. (Hereafter cited as USAID, Facts).

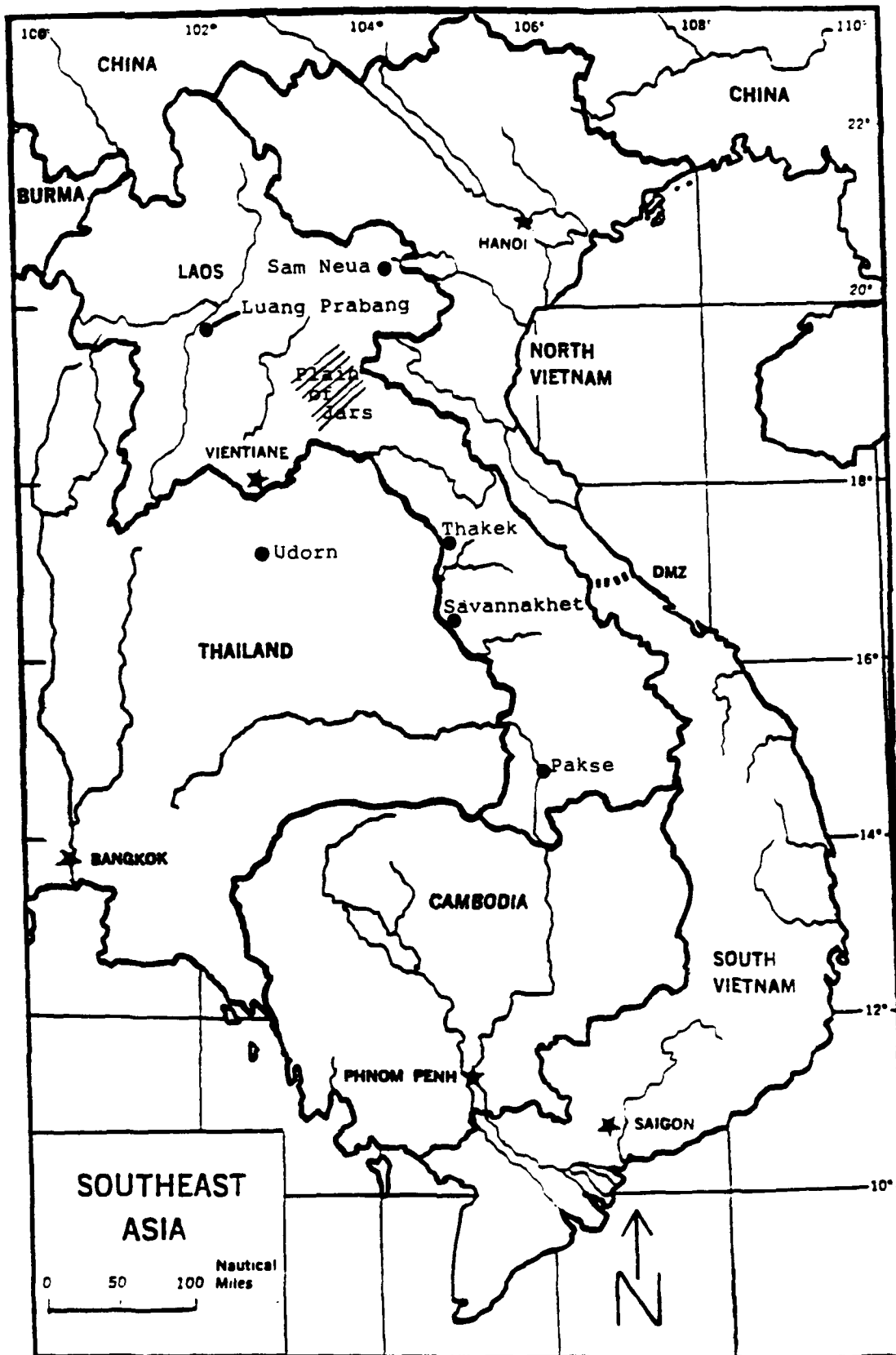
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A discussion of American involvement with the kingdom of Laos must begin with a basic question: Why was Laos of importance to the United States? A statistical summary of the modern Kingdom of Laos is singularly unimpressive. As the prominent Southeast Asian scholar Bernard Fall observed, Laos was "neither a geographical nor an ethnic or social entity, but merely a political convenience."¹ Yet, these very factors brought the kingdom to the forefront of international concern and attention. In the jittery post-World War II world, remote Laos would become the locus of a major cold war struggle.

Geography

Laos is a landlocked, sparsely populated, mostly mountainous country located on the Indochinese peninsula.² Following the 1954 Geneva Accords, the country was bordered on the east by North and South Vietnam (1,324 miles), on the north by the People's Republic of China (264 miles), and on the northwest by Burma (148 miles). It shared its southern border with Cambodia (336 miles), and western border with Thailand (1,090 miles). The most prominent geographical features are the Annam Cordillera mountain range, which extends from the southern portion of Vietnam through Laos and into southern China and Tibet, and the Mekong river, which



MAP OF MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA

flows from northwest to southeast.³ Juxtaposed with more powerful neighbors intent on using its territory to support and wage war, Laos became locked by geographic fate into a long and devastating conflict.

The Plain of Jars, a high rolling grassland located in the center of northern Laos, is also of particular significance to this study.⁴ Dramatically beautiful and surrounded by some of the highest mountains in Southeast Asia, the area has historically been an important crossroads for commerce moving between Vietnam and the Mekong valley. These features have also given the plain an important strategic value. For centuries, armies have crossed through the area en route to wars in the north and south. This pattern continued during the second Indochina war.

I visited the Plain of Jars in September 1990. Bomb craters, the result of heavy combat in the 1960's and 1970's, were still highly visible throughout the area. Moreover, there is a tremendous amount of unexploded and potentially deadly ordnance spread about the region. Normal endeavors, like farming and travel, are very dangerous. Deaths and serious injuries among local residents are a serious and continuing problem.⁵

Government and Society

The Lao constitutional monarchy abolished by Communist directive in December 1975 can be traced to Fa Ngum, who in 1353 became the first king of Lan Xang (Million Elephants).⁶

The last sovereign, Savang Vatthana,⁷ exercised little power and influence. The constitution promulgated in 1947 vested paramount authority in the prime minister and the Council of Ministers. The National Assembly, elected every five years, was the principal legislative body.⁸

Although a formal census was not taken until 1985, the estimated population of Laos during the period of this study was three million people.⁹ Its density varied from less than three persons per square mile in the mountainous areas to 130 persons per square mile in the lowland areas adjacent the Mekong river. Officially, there were forty-four areas classified as cities and towns. The five largest were Vientiane, the administrative capital, with a population of some 150,000; Luang Prabang, the royal capital, 25,000; Savannakhet, with about 39,000; Pakse, approximately 37,000; and Khammouane (Thakek), more than 13,000. The Royal Lao government administratively defined sixteen provinces and five military regions.¹⁰

The ethnic configuration of Laos can be usefully divided into four major categories:¹¹ Lao Lum (Valley), Lao Tai (Higher Valley), Lao Theung (Mountainside), and Lao Sung (Mountaintop). As indicated, these groups live separate from one another according to each's traditional altitude. Consequently, Laos has historically suffered from an inherent disunity. The Lao Lum, or simply Lao, are a subgroup of the Tai people who originated in southern China. They represent

between one-third and one-half of the population and are settled in the lowland areas along both sides of the Mekong river and its tributaries.¹² The Lao Lum comprise the most educated indigenous group and have dominated in the areas of commerce and government. They are predominately Theravada Buddhists, and their faith directly influences everyday life in Laos. The royal family and all but a few of the ruling elite are ethnic Lao Lum.¹³

The Lao Tai are also a Tai people who migrated to Laos from southern China. Sometimes called the tribal Tai, they can be subdivided into more than a dozen different groups and live primarily in the upland river valleys and plateaus. They subsist by growing irrigated rice, slash and burn farming, and occasionally dry rice cultivation. In contrast to the Lao Lum, the Lao Tai have accepted little influence from Indian culture and generally avoid urban areas.¹⁴ Some Lao Tai groups practice ancestor worship and there is universal belief in the presence and importance of phi, or spirits.¹⁵ Lao Tai dialects are similar in structure to the Lao Lum language. In the late 1960's the Lao Tai had an estimated population of 390,000.¹⁶

The Lao Theung, or mountainside Lao, are often referred to as the Kha, or slave tribes of Laos. Believed by the Lao Lum to have been the original inhabitants of Laos, they have suffered under centuries of discrimination. Traditionally docile, they have been the least represented in the Royal Lao government. The Lao Theung prefer to live on mountain slopes

above the Lao Tai and grow rice by the slash and burn method. They practice a variety of religions from Buddhism to ancestor worship. The Lao Theung speak a Mon-Khmer language and had a population of 675,000 in 1969.¹⁷

The Hmong are the Lao Sung or mountaintop Lao. They are members of an ethnic group that has several million members living in the neighboring northern mountain areas of Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, and the southern mountain regions of the People's Republic of China. Hmong movement out of southern China and into the northeastern mountains of Southeast Asia is a relatively recent phenomenon. Pressured by the Han Chinese, the Hmong began to migrate into northern Laos in the 1800's. More aggressive and warlike than the indigenous peoples of Laos, the Hmong met little resistance in claiming mountaintop homes throughout northern Laos.¹⁸

Estimated in 1971 to number between 300,000 and 500,000 in Laos, the Hmong prefer to live at elevations of between three and six thousand feet.¹⁹ Many believe that this would protect them from ill health, unfriendly spirits, and the disdain and discrimination of the lowland Lao Lum.²⁰ Upland rice, raised by slash and burn farming, is the staple food of the Hmong. They also cultivate for trade or feed for livestock other crops, such as potatoes, corn and squash. In addition, the Hmong raise chickens, pigs, cattle, and water buffalo. Their most important crop, and traditional source of cash, is opium.²¹ Spirits, called Tlan, are an important

part of Hmong life. Although animists, the Hmong do have a concept of a supreme being called Fua Tai who created all things.²² The Hmong language is assigned to the Sino-Tibetan language group.²³

Submissive by nature and unable to grow more than bare subsistence crops, the Lao Tai and Lao Theung have historically been dominated and mistreated by the Lao Lum. In contrast, a valuable cash crop (opium) and independent lifestyle allowed the Hmong successfully to live outside the sway of the Lao Lum-controlled central government. It is, therefore, not a little ironic that the Hmong would be called upon to defend their less resolute countrymen and bear the brunt of Communist aggression and wartime brutality in Laos. What is even more incongruous, is that these proud and enigmatic people would be summoned not by the Lao Lum, but by Americans determined to develop an effective indigenous Lao fighting force.

Three Brothers and Lao Nationalism

Following the Japanese coup de main in March of 1945,²⁴ a group of prominent Laotians led by the Viceroy of Laos, Prince Phetsarath, joined together to form a nationalist movement opposed to the reimposition of French rule.²⁵ In October, when King Sisavang Vong called for a resumption of the French protectorate, Prince Phetsarath formed a new government called Lao Issara (Free Laos) to resist a French return. Phetsarath was aided in this new government by his

two younger brothers, Prince Souvanna Phouma and Prince Souphanouvong.²⁶ The Lao Issara were eloquent in their distaste for the French. In a message dispatched to the French commissaire for Laos on 11 November 1945:

You appear to ignore the facts of the situation in Indochina, as well as the attitude of the governments of the Allies, among whom the Government of France has no place. Your politics are supported only by the imperialistic British government. You will run head-on into the determination of our people, whom your inhuman and hypocritical colonialism has sought to subjugate.... Only the egotists, traitors to their race, in quest of your gold and false honors, follow you.²⁷

Nevertheless, the Lao Issara were no match for the returning French armed forces and, by September 1946, Paris had regained control of the kingdom. The princes were forced to flee to Thailand where they established a government in exile.²⁸ In Bangkok, however, diverging personal ambitions soon split the group into three factions. Phetsarath was an "ambitious and shrewd aristocrat" who sought to place himself on the Lao throne. Souvanna Phouma, the pragmatist, doubted the wisdom of military action against the French and instead prepared quietly for a return "to a reconciled and unified nation, whose independence he felt was drawing near." Souphanouvong was "fiery, and quick-tempered ... [and] advocated open war."²⁹ Moreover, to the distress of many Lao, Prince Souphanouvong had increasingly involved himself with the Communist Viet Minh movement in Vietnam.³⁰

By late 1949 the royal brothers had gone their separate ways and the Lao Issara government was formally dissolved.

Souvanna Phouma accepted an offer of amnesty, returned to Laos, and within two years was prime minister. Phetsarath, piqued at King Sisavang Vong's refusal to reinstate his title of Viceroy, chose to continue his exile.³¹ Souphanouvong, resolute in his resistance to the French, obtained Viet Minh assistance and formed a guerilla organization called the Progressive People's Organization.³²

In mid-August 1950 Souphanouvong convened a revolutionary congress at the Viet Minh headquarters located north of Hanoi and proclaimed the formation of a new resistance government called the Land of Laos (Pathet Lao). The political arm of this government would eventually be known as the Lao Patriotic Front (Neo Lao Hak Sat). Souphanouvong had made a momentous decision to join with the Viet Minh. From this point forward, the Vietnamese Communists would support the Pathet Lao as military allies and ideological mentors.³³

Indochina, America, and the Cold War

On 2 September 1945, standing before a reported one million people in Hanoi, President Ho Chi Minh declared, "Viet Nam has the right to enjoy freedom and independence and in fact has become a free and independent country."³⁴ Emancipation would be short lived. French military forces returned to Indochina within a few weeks and set the stage for a war which would continue until May of 1954. America, despite "an anticolonialism that was still popular in the United States in the postwar years,"³⁵ provided important

military aid in the reestablishment of the French colonial empire.³⁶

Why did U.S. policymakers defer traditional American values and provide support to the French? Communist gains in eastern Europe had convinced Washington that France should be returned to the status of a "great power." The "building [of] stable and prosperous Western European governments that could stand as bulwarks against Russian expansion" became critical to U.S. security objectives in Europe.³⁷ In order to insure French support of American objectives in Europe, the U.S. pledged not to interfere with a French return to Indochina.³⁸ Seeking to bolster its new containment strategy in Europe, America ignored the national aspirations of the Vietnamese people and likely lost an opportunity to avert a devastating Franco-Viet Minh war.³⁹

Moreover, during the next several years it became obvious that Communist activity in Indochina was just as menacing, and certainly more lethal, than the spread of Communism in Europe. By 1949 French forces had suffered more than thirty thousand casualties in their largely unsuccessful war against the Viet Minh.⁴⁰ U.S. concern was expressed on 30 December 1949, as National Security Council (NSC) study 48/2 declared:

The United States on its own initiative should now scrutinize closely the development of threats from Communist aggression, direct or indirect, and be prepared to help within our means to meet such threats by providing political, economic, and military assistance and advice where clearly needed to supplement the resistance of other governments in and out of the areas which are more directly

concerned.... Particular attention should be given to the problem of Indochina.⁴¹

Seeking to stem the "Red Tide," the United States was moving quickly toward an interventionist policy in Southeast Asia.

America's Indochina involvement was advanced further when, on 29 January 1950, the French government established Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia as autonomous "Associated States" within the French Union. A week later the United States granted recognition to the new governments, opening the way for direct U.S. military and economic assistance.⁴² On 27 February the National Security Council issued memorandum 64 which dealt exclusively with United States policy toward Indochina. A portion of the document postulated what would later be called the "domino theory" by declaring:

The neighboring countries of Thailand and Burma could be expected to fall under Communist domination if Indochina were controlled by a Communist-dominated government. The balance of Southeast Asia would then be in grave hazard. Accordingly, the Departments of State and Defense should prepare as a matter of priority a program of all practicable measures designed to protect U.S. interests in Indochina.⁴³

President Truman, apparently without consulting any Members of Congress, approved the position on 24 April 1950 and the United States was officially committed to the Indochina war.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, by early 1950, anti-Communism was becoming a staple of American politics. Senator Joseph R. McCarthy and others were attacking the administration for the "loss" of China. Communism, it seemed, was on the march. Writing in the Saturday Evening Post, influential journalist Stewart

Alsop warned:

The head pin was China. It is down already. The two pins in the second row are Burma and Indochina. If they go, the three pins in the next row, Siam, Malaya, and Indonesia, are pretty sure to topple in their turn. And if all the rest of Asia goes, the resulting psychological, political and economic magnetism will almost certainly drag down the four pins of the fourth row, India, Pakistan, Japan and the Philippines.⁴⁵

This alarmist scenario, coupled with the disclosure that in 1949 the Soviets successfully tested an atomic device, jolted American priorities and prompted President Truman to request a review of U.S. foreign policy goals. The result was NSC memorandum 68, "probably the longest, most detailed and perhaps the most important policy paper ever produced by the National Security Council." The memo, first drafted on 7 April 1950, concluded that "the cold war is in fact a real war in which the survival of the free world is at stake." The study strongly supported NSC 64 in calling for convincing action to prevent Communist expansion. On 27 June 1950, as part of Washington's response to the 25 June invasion of South Korea, President Truman announced the U.S. would establish a military mission in each of the Associated States.⁴⁶ It was a fateful decision which ultimately led the United States into its most hotly debated and misunderstood war.

Bankrolling the French

On 23 December 1950 the United States, France, and the Associated States of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia signed the Pentilateral Mutual Defense Assistance Pact and established

procedures for the transfer of U.S. military aid to French forces in Indochina.⁴⁷ The agreement called for American personnel assigned to the Saigon-based Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), Indochina, to observe the "progress and the technical use made of the assistance granted." From the outset, however, the French failed to comply with these terms. The French army "allowed no observation of units in combat operations, and inspections in the rear areas had to be arranged two months in advance." The U.S. Air Force and Navy MAAG inspection teams had greater success in observing their counterparts. They found "bad operational habits ... lack of respect for preventive maintenance ... [the] standard French procedure of drinking while working ... [and] American vessels which had been turned over to the French in excellent condition were now rusty and dirty."⁴⁸ All the while, General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, French commander-in-chief in Indochina, was complaining bitterly of America's lack of support and MAAG requests for "excessive justification" of French aid requests.⁴⁹

"By 1952, the United States was bearing roughly one-third of the cost of the war, but it was dissatisfied with the results and found itself with no influence over French military policy."⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the United States felt compelled to continue military and economic aid to France. Explains Professor George G. Herring:

America's Indochina policy continued to be a hostage of its policy in Europe, the area to which Truman

and Acheson assigned the highest priority. Since 1951, the United States had been pressing for allied approval of the European Defense Community.... The French repeatedly warned that they could not furnish troops for European defense without generous American support in Indochina.⁵¹

As a result the French continued to receive ever increasing amounts of U.S. military aid.⁵²

Viet Minh Successes and the Navarre Plan

U.S. support notwithstanding, when Dwight D. Eisenhower became President in 1953 the war was going badly for the French. "In the campaign of 1952, the Republicans had attacked the Democrats for failing to halt the advance of Communism, and they were even more determined than their predecessors to prevent the fall of Indochina."⁵³ In early April 1953, however, the People's Army of Vietnam, having successfully captured the northern Tonkin provinces, turned west into Laos. The Viet Minh force consisted of four divisions commanded by General Vo Nguyen Giap and some two thousand Pathet Lao soldiers under the leadership of Prince Souphanouvong. These forty thousand men faced ten thousand Lao and three thousand French troops.⁵⁴ Giap hoped to capture the royal city at Luang Prabang, while at the same time attacking French and Lao positions on the Plain of Jars. The capture of Luang Prabang would deal a great psychological blow to the French and Lao and the loss of the plain would pose a direct threat to Vientiane. Yet another Viet Minh army would cross central Laos, reach the Mekong river, and thereby split

the country in two.

The Communist forces were successful in capturing the Lao border province of Sam Neua and on 19 April Souphanouvong established his rebel headquarters in Sam Neua city. The army then moved toward the royal capital, where they met unexpected French resistance and the onset of the monsoon rains. These delays seem to have convinced the Communist leadership an attack was too dangerous and they withdrew.⁵⁵

Notably, the CIA's proprietary airline, Civil Air Transport (CAT), provided important assistance to the beleaguered kingdom. From 6 May until 16 July 1953, a dozen CAT pilots, flying U.S. Air Force C-119 transports with French markings, dropped military supplies to French forces operating in Laos.⁵⁶ Thus, Civil Air Transport, later to become Air America, began its twenty-two year connection with the hazardous mountains and jungles of Laos.⁵⁷

The Viet Minh and Pathet Lao attack into Laos "shattered" President Eisenhower's confidence in the French and led him to believe that "if Laos were lost, the rest of Southeast Asia would follow and the gateway to India would be opened." On 7 May 1953, he dispatched a letter to French Premier Rene Mayer calling for a new French commander in chief for Indochina. Remarkably, Eisenhower even included the names of two senior officers he thought were suited for the job. The French, however, had already decided a change was in order and announced that Lieutenant General Henri Navarre, who had never

served in Vietnam, would assume command of the war.⁵⁸

At the urging of the United States, General Navarre was soon proposing a determined new strategy which "called for a vast augmentation of the Vietnamese National Army and for the establishment of a new training program, along with the commitment to Indochina of an additional nine battalions of French regulars." France also promised more independence for the Associated States. The plan would require an additional \$400 million in U.S. aid and, if the new strategy was not realized, France "would have to consider withdrawal from Indochina."⁵⁹

The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff were not convinced the French forces would, or could, successfully adopt the changes necessary for successful implementation of the Navarre plan. "Yet the United States still had no acceptable alternative to supporting the French. If a negotiated settlement of the war was intolerable, then the only choice was to bankroll the Navarre plan and hope for the best." The U.S. acquiesced, and at the end of September the French military received an infusion of \$385 million.⁶⁰

Dien Bien Phu

Over the next few months the "military and political situation in Indochina drastically deteriorated." General Navarre quickly deviated from his plan. Seeking to block another Viet Minh invasion of Laos and confident his forces could destroy the rebels in a set piece battle, Navarre

established a major base in the valley of Dien Bien Phu.⁶¹

General Navarre's decision to stand at Dien Bien Phu was influenced by a Franco-Lao treaty of "friendship and association," signed on 22 October 1953. The treaty and several conventions "simultaneously reaffirmed the independence of Laos and its membership in the French Union." Implicit in the agreement was a French pledge to protect Laos from outside attack. Bernard Fall suggests that Navarre believed the treaty obligated him to defend Laos and that the "valley of Dien Bien Phu was the place from which to defend it." In a 20 November 1953 message to the French government General Navarre declared, "I have decided a thrust upon Dien Bien Phu, whose reoccupation will cover the approach to Luang Prabang which, without it, would be in grave danger within a few weeks."⁶²

General Navarre's decision proved disastrous. By January 1954, the French had positioned approximately 13,000 men; the Vietnamese, 49,500 combatants and 55,000 support troops.⁶³ In February, the Viet Minh forces had succeeded in placing their heavy weapons along the rim of the valley, and looked down on the trapped French forces with anticipated victory.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, negotiations between France and the Bao Dai government had reached a crisis over Vietnamese demands for full independence. "Many French politicians concluded that Vietnamese association with the French Union, if only symbolic, was all that could be salvaged from the war and

without this there was no reason to prolong the agony." The French were faltering and despite the objections of the U.S., "France in early 1954 agreed to place Indochina on the agenda of an East-West conference scheduled to meet in Geneva."⁶⁵

President Eisenhower and his hard line Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, were now forced to consider the possibility of a negotiated settlement in Indochina. They feared such a resolution would surrender Indochina to the Communists and open the way for further Communist gains in Asia and the Pacific. On the other hand, both were convinced that unilateral military intervention by the United States would be a grave mistake. Ultimately, President Eisenhower decided to wait for developments at the Geneva talks and on 29 April 1954, the National Security Council decided "to hold up for the time being any military action on Indo-China."⁶⁶ A week later, following a siege of fifty-six days and the loss of more than eight thousand Viet Minh and two thousand French Union soldiers, General Giap's forces captured Dien Bien Phu.⁶⁷ The French Indochina empire had been dealt a mortal blow. Moreover, the United States would now have to consider the consequences of a Communist government in Vietnam, and what steps might be taken to support "free world" countries in the region.

Geneva 1954

On 8 May 1954 representatives from France, the Soviet Union, the United States, the People's Republic of China,

Great Britain, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh, the Republic of Vietnam under Bao Dai, and the Kingdoms of Laos and Cambodia assembled in Geneva to work out a solution for Indochina. After much anguish and discord, the conferees agreed to partition Vietnam along the seventeenth parallel, with the Ho government in control of all territory north of the line. Addressing the future of Laos, Sir Anthony Eden, the British foreign secretary, declared:

... Laos should remain as an independent and neutral buffer between China and Siam. It is therefore essential that the United States should not attempt to establish any military influence [there]. Any attempt to do so was bound to provoke some countermove by China.⁶⁸

The conferees agreed and on 20 July 1954 Laos was "reaffirmed as a unitary, independent state with a single government in Vientiane. A cease-fire was to take effect on 6 August and within 120 days all "Vietnamese People's Volunteers" were to leave the country. The Pathet Lao "were to regroup in the two northern provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly pending integration into the Lao army or demobilization ... [and] all foreign powers except France were prohibited from establishing or maintaining bases in Laos."⁶⁹

The Geneva agreements were applauded by the Soviet and Chinese press and described by the British foreign secretary as the "best France could have obtained under the circumstances." The Communist Vietnamese left the conference claiming they "could have won all of Tonkin and most of Annam, Cochin China, Laos, and Cambodia, within a year if the war had

continued."⁷⁰

Predictably, the settlement in Geneva received a chilly reception in Washington.⁷¹ At a 21 July news conference President Eisenhower seemed anxious to distance the U.S. from the agreements. The president said he was "glad" that a consensus had been reached to end the bloodshed, but the "agreements contain features which we do not like..." The president was clearly thinking about the legitimization of the Ho Chi Minh government and its effect on the rest of Southeast Asia. He pointed out the U.S. was "not itself [a] party to or bound by the decisions taken by the Conference."⁷²

NSC 5429/2

Indeed, the United States was moving quickly to counter the Communist gains in Vietnam. On 20 August 1954 President Eisenhower approved National Security Council policy statement 5429/2 which said the United States was to "make every possible effort, not openly inconsistent with the U.S. government position as to the [Geneva] armistice agreements, to defeat Communist subversion and influence and to maintain and support friendly non-Communist governments" in the region.⁷³ The Kingdom of Thailand "was to hold a central position in the new American strategy for the region."⁷⁴ The policy statement recommended the U.S. provide military and economic assistance to the Thais and "concentrate efforts on developing Thailand as a support of U.S. objectives in the area and as a focal point of U.S. covert and psychological

operations in Southeast Asia."⁷⁵ The stage was set for the United States and the Kingdom of Thailand to expand covert activities against Communist efforts in Southeast Asia.⁷⁶

The Manila Pact

The Southeast Asia Collective Defence Treaty and the Pacific Charter, signed in Manila, Republic of the Philippines on 8 September 1954, was a further demonstration of America's measured response to Communist expansion in Southeast Asia.⁷⁷ Commonly called the Manila Pact, the United States, Britain, France, New Zealand, Australia, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand agreed to form a regional defence organization called the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). Although the Geneva Accords prevented Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam from joining the association, a separate protocol extended SEATO protection to the former colonies.⁷⁸

SEATO, like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), was created by the United States to provide a multilateral framework for the containment of Communism. There were, however, significant differences between the two organizations.

As a whole, NATO was a strong association of natural allies in the North Atlantic community, bound together by a common heritage, by firm commitments and by an elaborate organization. SEATO was only a consultative pact with no unified command, little common interest, and no contribution of forces to a standing army. SEATO was no Asiatic NATO.⁷⁹

Moreover, while there were similarities between the SEATO and NATO declarations,⁸⁰ the SEATO document used intentionally

ambiguous language from the Monroe Doctrine. Article Four stated, "Each Party recognizes that aggression by means of armed attack ... against any of the Parties ... would endanger its own peace and safety, and agrees that it will in that event act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes."⁸¹

The wording represented the uneasiness of Secretary of State Dulles and was clearly intended to provide the U.S. with freedom and flexibility in the commitment of American military forces to the region. Three weeks before the agreement was signed Dulles had expressed concern to President Eisenhower that:

the projected SEA Treaty ... [involves] committing the prestige of the United States in an area where we had little control and where the situation was by no means promising. On the other hand, ... failure to go ahead would work a total abandonment of the area without a struggle.⁸²

Thailand, America, and a Military Buildup

The Manila Pact and the establishment of SEATO "was the watershed of Thai-American relations."⁸³ According to East Asian specialist R. Sean Randolph:

Thailand broke with its past by investing its future in an explicit and only slightly qualified alliance with the United States. That alliance, at first informal, but later formalized in the Manila Treaty, has since constituted the core of Thai-American relations. It became a central objective of Thai foreign policy to obtain the firmest possible American guarantee of Thailand's security. Beginning in the early 1950s themes of security and of American credibility have dominated Thai-American relations.⁸⁴

Foreign aid was an important lever against the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia and the United States carefully structured foreign aid to Thailand to meet this specific security aim. According to international economist Robert J. Muscat:

The primary objectives [of U.S. aid to Thailand] concerned no less than the integrity of the Thai state in the face of regional threats and the internal stability and economic development that had been judged by successive Thai and American governments as essential conditions for maintaining Thailand's external security.⁸⁵

The result was the development, beginning in 1950, of a "two pronged economic and military aid relationship" between the United States and Thailand.⁸⁶ The basis for this strategy was a 19 September 1950 "Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement" and a 17 October 1950 "Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement." The first agreement quickly produced \$8 million in economic aid and the establishment of a U.S. Operations Mission (USOM) to assist in Thai development. Within a month the Thai government was being assisted by "fifty technical experts working in the fields of agriculture, irrigation, transportation, communication, commerce, education, and public health." In October, the World Bank awarded Thailand a \$25.5 million loan to assist "in the rehabilitation of the country's transportation and irrigation network."⁸⁷

Military aid was substantial as well. A U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) was assigned to Bangkok to "facilitate and supervise the training of the Thai armed

forces and the distribution of military assistance." This assistance amounted to "\$4.5 million in 1951, \$12 million in 1952, and \$56 million in 1953."⁸⁸

The signing of the Manila Pact engendered ever greater military assistance. From 1954-1962 the United States provided Thailand approximately \$97 million for "upgrading and construction of minimal facilities at seven Royal Thai Air Force bases, ten Royal Thai Army base camps, two Royal Thai Army hospitals, two Royal Thai Naval bases, and ... ammunition-storage facilities."⁸⁹ Thailand was well on its way to becoming a "launching pad" for America's anti-Communist stand in Southeast Asia.

ENDNOTES FOR CHAPTER I

1. Fall, Anatomy, 23. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., refers to Laos as "a state by diplomatic courtesy" in A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965) 323.
2. Indochina was a creation of nineteenth century French imperialism. It was comprised of five separate Southeast Asian administrative regions; Cochinchina (southern Vietnam), Annam (central Vietnam), Tonkin (northern Vietnam), Cambodia, and Laos. Cochinchina was technically the only colony, while Annam, Tonkin, Cambodia, and Laos were protectorates. See David J. Steinberg, ed., In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History (New York: Praeger, 1971) 179-80.
3. Department of the Army, Donald P. Whitaker., et al., Laos: A Country Study D.A. Pam 550-58, 2d ed. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1979) 11, and 19.
4. The plain takes its name from the presence of more than a hundred stone receptacles. They are believed to be the remains of a Chinese culture of some two thousand years ago. Dommen, Conflict, 2-3.
5. For an impassioned review of the bombing of the Plain of Jars see Fredric R. Branfman. Voices from the Plain of Jars: Life Under an Air War. New York: Harper, 1972.
6. Dommen, Conflict, 6. The proper romanized spelling of lowland and highland Lao names, both for people and places,

has long been subject to various interpretations. This inconsistency was compounded after December 1975 when the new Communist regime instituted a number of changes to the written Lao language. I have attempted to use the spelling which is most often found in scholarly treatments of Laos. I use the terms "Laos" and "Royal Lao government" (RLG) interchangeably when referring to the recognized government operating from the administrative capital at Vientiane.

7. After the Communist takeover Savang Vatthana and his wife were placed in a special re-education facility in northeastern Laos. In 1989 the LPDR officially confirmed that the king had died some years previously. Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), "Laos' Phomvihana Confirms King's Death," FBIS Vienna AU, 141912Z December 1989. Most Lao believe the king and queen were starved to death. The royal palace in Luang Prabang is now a museum, housing but a few pitiful reminders of the long history of Lan Xang. I visited the royal palace in August 1990.

8. Whitaker, Country Study, 149-54. See also USAID, Facts, 35-71.

9. Whitaker, Country Study, 20-1. According to United Nations statistics, the population of Laos in March 1985 was just over 3.5 million. Currently, the population is estimated at some four million inhabitants. United Nations, "Salient Features of Lao PDR." (Document in my possession).

10. Whitaker, Country Study, 268. The provinces were: Phong Saly, Houa Khong, Luang Prabang, Houa Phan (Sam Neua), Xieng Khouang, Sayaboury, Vientiane, Borikhane, Khammouane, Savannakhet, Saravane, Sedone, Champassak, Vapikamthong, Attapeu, and Sithandone. The military regions were: Military Region I, comprised of Phong Saly, Houa Khong, Sayaboury, and Luang Prabang; Military Region II, Houa Phan and Xieng Khouang; Military Region III, Khammouane and Savannakhet; Military Region IV, Saravane, Attapeu, Champassak, Sedone, Vapikamthong, and Sithandone; Military Region V, Vientiane and Borikhane. See Soutchay Vongsavanh, RLG Military Operations and Activities in the Laotian Panhandle (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1978) 23-5.

11. According to the United Nations, the Lao People's Democratic Republic has officially proclaimed sixty-eight distinct ethno-linguistic groups in Laos. United Nations, "Salient Features of Lao PDR." For an excellent summary of Communist policy toward the various Lao hill tribes see Gary D. Wekkin, "The Rewards of Revolution: Pathet Lao Policy Towards the Hill Tribes Since 1975" and Gary Y. Lee, "Minority Policies and the Hmong" in Contemporary Laos: Studies in the Politics and Society of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, ed. Martin Stuart-Fox. (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1982), 181-219.

12. In 1970 it was estimated that there were eight times as many Lao living in Thailand as in Laos. Whitaker, Country Study, 41.
13. Joseph P. Westermeyer, "The Use of Alcohol and Opium Among Two Ethnic Groups in Laos." (M.A. thesis, University of Minnesota, 1968), 15, and Whitaker, Country Study, 41-45.
14. Ibid, 50-1.
15. Animism, the belief that natural objects, natural phenomena, and the universe itself possess souls or consciousness, is a pervading influence in the lives of most Lao. A strong belief in phi is quite common amongst Lao Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. Ibid., 107, and 124.
16. Ibid., 50-1.
17. Ibid., 52-3.
18. Frank M. LeBar, Gerald C. Hickey, and John K. Musgrave, Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia (New Haven, Conn.: Human Relations Area Files Press, 1964) 73. For additional information on Hmong migration into northern Southeast Asia see Herold J. Wiens. China's March Toward the Tropics. Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String Press, 1954, and William R. Geddes. Migrants of the Mountains. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976. For a detailed study of the Hmong see Yang Dao. Les Hmong du Laos Face au Developpement. Vientiane: Editions Siaosavath, 1975.
19. Whitaker, Country Study, 54-5.
20. Westermeyer, Use of Alcohol and Opium, 19.

21. Ibid., 16-7.

22. Peter Kunstadter, ed., Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967) 287-8. See also George M. Scott, Jr., "Migrants Without Mountains: The Politics of Sociocultural Adjustment Among the Lao Hmong Refugees in San Diego." (Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 1986) 98-106.

23. Whitaker, Country Study, 55. Additional information on the Hmong language may be found in Ernest E. Heimbach. White Meo-English Dictionary. Data Paper no. 75. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1969, and Glenn L. Hendricks, Bruce T. Downing, and Amos S. Deinard, eds. The Hmong in Transition. New York: Center for Migration Studies of New York, Inc., and the Southeast Asian Refugee Studies Project of the University of Minnesota, 1986.

24. "On the evening of 9 March, the Japanese ambassador to French Indochina presented Governor-General Admiral Jean Decoux with an ultimatum demanding that direct control of the government, police, and armed forces of the colony be turned over to the Japanese. Two hours later Japanese forces moved against French forts and garrisons all over Indochina.... The Japanese coup ... marked a turning point in the history of Indochina. It signalled the end of the painful French pretense to sovereignty and provided new opportunities for ... opponents of the French." Ronald H. Spector, Advice and

Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960 (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1983) 30.

25. For a detailed review of French rule in Laos see Toye, Buffer State or Battlefield, 23-49. A well documented study of the early Lao nationalist and Communist movements is found in Geoffrey C. Gunn, Political Struggles in Laos (1930-1954). Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1988. A lengthy review of Prince Phetsarath's life, believed by several experts to be an autobiography, is Iron Man of Laos: Prince Phetsarath Ratanavongsa. By 3349. Translated by John B. Murdoch and edited by David K. Wyatt. Data Paper, no. 110. Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1978.

26. Dommen, Conflict, 22. Souvanna Phouma and Phetsarath shared the same father (Viceroy Boun Khong) and mother. Souphanouvong had the same father, but was born to the viceroy's eleventh wife. All three men had been educated in Europe and Phetserath and Souvanna Phouma returned home to prominent positions. In contrast, Souphanouvong, a brilliant student with enormous promise, was posted by the French to a low paid position at Nha Trang in Vietnam. The young prince remained in Vietnam for seven influential years. See Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 29.

27. Dommen, Conflict, 24.

28. A lengthy review of the Lao Issara government in exile can be found in Gunn, Political Struggles, 187-214.

29. Sisouk, Storm Over Laos, 14-15.

30. Souphanouvong travelled to Hanoi in July 1946 and met with Ho Chi Minh. The prince was impressed with Ho's aggressive tactics and sought to model them. Fall, Anatomy, 40-1. Souphanouvong's "resentment of French colonialism, compounded by personal rebuffs; his exposure to socialist ideas in France during the Popular Front, his receptivity to Vietnamese vitality, represented by his Vietnamese wife; and his princely ambitions to assume leadership made him ready and willing to join the anticolonial cause of the Viet Minh." Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 29.

31. Dommen, Conflict, 28, and 34.

32. Dommen, Conflict, 34.

33. Fall, Anatomy, 43-4. Souphanouvong's predilection toward Ho and the Viet Minh would result in the 1955 establishment of a Lao Communist party. Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 29, and 47. A complete review of this relationship is found in Paul F. Langer and Joseph J. Zasloff, North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao: Partners in the Struggle for Laos. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970. See also Edwin T. McKeithen, "The Role of North Vietnamese Cadres in the Pathet Lao Administration of Xieng Khouang Province." Xieng Khouang, Laos: April 1970, and Joseph J. Zasloff, The Pathet Lao: Leadership and Organization. Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath, 1973.

34. William J. Duiker, The Communist Road To Power In Vietnam (Boulder: Westview, 1981) 100. For an eye witness account of

Ho's speech see Archimedes L.A. Patti, Why Viet Nam?: Prelude to America's Albatross (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) 248-51. Patti says, based on U.S. aerial photography, that the crowd numbered between five and six hundred thousand.

35. George McTurnan Kahin, Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam (New York: Knopf, 1986) 3.

36. George C. Herring, "The Truman Administration and the Restoration of French Sovereignty in Indochina," Diplomatic History 1 (1977) 114.

37. Ibid., 101.

38. Ibid., 104-5. Professor Herring goes on to say, "Neither Truman nor the top State Department officials to whom he turned for guidance shared Roosevelt's appreciation of the significance of Asian nationalism or his profound distrust of France. The Truman administration never considered making France accountable to some international authority. It quickly acquiesced in the restoration of French sovereignty and refused to use its influence to get France to make some accommodation with Indochinese nationalism." Ibid., 115-6.

39. For example, "Ho Chi Minh made a number of efforts to bring the Vietnamese cause to the attention of the U.S. Government, but his letters to Truman and Secretary of State James F. Byrnes ... were officially ignored." William C. Gibbons, The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships, Part I: 1945-1960,

- (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986) 22.
(Hereafter cited as Gibbons, U.S. and the Vietnam War, Part I). See also Herring, "Truman Administration," 112, and Patti, Why Vietnam?, 231, 350, and 380-1.
40. Spector, The Early Years, 96. For a review of the Franco-Viet Minh war see Bernard B. Fall, Street Without Joy (New York: Schocken, 1972) 22-310, and Phillip B. Davidson, Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975 (Novato: Presidio, 1988) 31-252.
41. As quoted in Goldstein, American Policy, 47.
42. The Pentagon Papers: The Senator Gravel Edition, 5 vols. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973) I:64-5. (Hereafter cited as Gravel, Pentagon Papers).
43. Ibid., I:194.
44. Gibbons, U.S. and the Vietnam War, Part I, 66-7.
45. Cited in Michael Schaller, The American Occupation of Japan: The Origins of the Cold War in Asia (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) 232.
46. Professor Gibbons points out that some observers have mistakenly assumed the Korean war prompted the decision to establish the missions. U.S. military assistance to Indochina was, as indicated, part of an NSC strategy approved months earlier. Gibbons, U.S. and the Vietnam War, Part I, 73.
47. Spector, The Early Years, 116.
48. Ibid., 116-7.
49. Ibid., 119

50. George C. Herring, America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975 (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1979)

20.

51. Ibid., 23.

52. In 1954 the U.S. Foreign Operations Administration, estimated that from 1950 to 1954 the U.S. provided France with about \$1.2 billion for the war in Indochina. In March 1954 a French politician reported that the U.S. was "carrying 78 percent of the cost of the Indochina war." Goldstein, American Policy, 62. Another U.S. source reports that by February 1953 the U.S. had furnished France with "some 900 combat vehicles, 15,000 other vehicles, almost 2,500 artillery pieces, 24,000 automatic weapons, 75,000 small arms, and nearly 9,000 radios. In addition, French air units had received 160 F-6F fighter aircraft, 41 B-26 light bombers, and 28 C-47 transports plus 155 aircraft engines and 93,000 bombs." Spector, The Early Years, 167-8. According to Bernard Fall, "U.S. actual expenditures in Indochina had reached an approximate total of \$954 million by July 1954. During 1946-54, the French had spent close to \$11 billion of their own funds for the prosecution of the war." Fall, Street Without Joy, 314.

53. Herring, America's Longest War, 25.

54. Fall, Anatomy, 47.

55. Fall, Anatomy, 47-54. See also Toye, Buffer State or Battlefield, 85, and Dommen, Conflict, 40-2.

56. Leary, Perilous Missions, 164-7. See also Gravel, Pentagon Papers, I:86.

57. The larger story, of course, involves the Asia wide activities of CAT and Air America. This study is confined to Air America's operations in Laos and Thailand. A forthcoming book by William M. Leary will provide a complete examination of this extraordinary company. CAT Incorporated changed its name to Air America in 1959. Leary, Perilous Missions, 208.

58. Spector, The Early Years, 172-3. Additional information on General Navarre can be found in Bernard B. Fall, Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu (New York: Da Capo, 1967) 26-9.

59. Herring, America's Longest War, 26-7.

60. Spector, The Early Years, 176-8.

61. Herring, America's Longest War, 28. Civil Air Transport was also deeply involved in the resupply of Dien Bien Phu. In mid-March 1954, "CAT pilots joined French military and civilian crews in airlifting personnel, food, medical supplies, ammunition, dismantled artillery pieces, tons of barbed wire, and other supplies. The C-119s, which could drop seven tons in a single pass, usually made two three hour round trips a day." In less than two months Civil Air Transport pilots flew some 682 airdrop missions over Dien Bien Phu. During this period communist gunners shot down forty-seven French piloted aircraft and severely damaged 167. CAT suffered two pilots killed in action, both lost the day before

the French surrendered. Leary, Perilous Missions, 185, and 191. See also William M. Leary, "CAT at Dien Bien Phu," Aerospace Historian Fall (September 1984): 177-84. Many of these CAT pilots continued to fly dangerous covert missions throughout Asia. Fred F. Walker, who flew twenty-one missions over Dien Bien Phu, later became Air America's Chief Pilot in Vientiane. Four years later in Indonesia, Alan L. Pope, who logged fifty-seven missions over the French base, was shot down and captured while flying for the CIA in an unmarked B-26 bomber. See Leary, Perilous Missions, 217, and John Prados, Presidents' Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations from World War II through Iranscam (New York: Quill, 1986) 143-4, and my interview with Fred F. Walker, Freyburg, Maine, 14 May 1989.

62. Fall, Hell in a Very Small Place, 34-5, and Fall, Anatomy, 57. The debate over Navarre's fateful decision to occupy Dien Bien Phu has been long and often strident. See Henri Navarre, Agonie de l'Indochine. Paris: Plon, 1956, and Jules Roy, La bataille de Dien Bien Phu. Paris: Julliard, 1963.

63. Fall, Hell in a Very Small Place, vii.

64. During the siege Viet Minh units employed at least 144 artillery pieces and fired an amazing 103,00 rounds of 75mm caliber or higher at the French forces. Ibid., 451.

65. Herring, America's Longest War, 28-9.

66. George C. Herring and Richard H. Immerman. "Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dien Bien Phu: The Day We Didn't Go To War

Revisited," Journal of American History 71 (September 1984): 361. Throughout the crisis the U.S. military prepared various contingency plans. One proposed operation, code named "Vulture," called for "massive night bombing attacks on Vietminh positions by as many as 300 United States aircraft launched from carriers in the region and perhaps from air bases in the Philippines." Herring and Immerman, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dien Bien Phu," 347. The plan was killed when, among other problems, Eisenhower could not gain congressional support for unilateral U.S. action. The introduction of nuclear weapons was also contemplated. On 8 April the Pentagon completed a study which proposed "the use of one to six 31-kiloton atomic bombs to be delivered by Navy carrier aircraft during the daylight against Viet Minh positions around Dien Bien Phu." Spector, The Early Years, 200.

67. Fall, Hell in a Very Small Place, 415. For the Viet Minh version of the battle see Vo Nguyen Giap, Dien Bien Phu. Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962.

68. Toye, Buffer State or Battlefield, 96-7. Since late 1949 the PRC had provided considerable political and military support to the Pathet Lao and their Viet Minh allies. See Dommen, Keystone, 40-2, Douglas Pike, History of Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1976 (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1978) 75, and Kaysone Phomvihane, Revolution in Laos (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1981) 17.

69. Dommen, Conflict, 53.

70. Chairman of the Council of Ministers Georgy Malenkov was reported as saying, "Geneva convincingly demonstrated that Socialists could give proof of their peaceful intentions." Robert F. Randle, Geneva 1954: The Settlement of the Indochinese War (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969) 357-9. Premier Zhou Enlai observed that, "The armistice in Indochina once again testifies that the forces of peace are irresistible." Chae-Jin Lee, Communist China's Policy Toward Laos: A Case Study, 1954-1967 (Lawrence, Kansas: Center for East Asian Studies, University of Kansas, 1970) 19-20. For an expanded view of Soviet and Chinese interests in Laos see Paul F. Langer, "The Soviet Union, China, and the Pathet Lao: Analysis and Chronology." Santa Monica: Rand Corp., 1972.

71. In contrast, "the reaction of the American public to the Geneva settlements was largely one of indifference. Opinion had been alerted in April by the administration's warnings of possible intervention in Indochina Rumors of intervention continued to circulate about Washington in May and June but, invariably, other news stories, such as the Army-McCarthy hearings and the Guatemalan insurrection, were given greater prominence in the American press. By mid-July the American people were little concerned with the vagaries of the Geneva negotiations." Randle, Geneva, 350.

72. Goldstein, American Policy, 89, and Allan W. Cameron, ed., Vietnam Crisis: A Documentary History, 2 vols. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971) I:321.

73. Spector, The Early Years, 228.

74. This policy recognized the fundamental post-World War II change in Thailand's traditional diplomatic stance of "bending with the wind." R. Sean Randolph, The United States and Thailand: Alliance Dynamics, 1950-1985 (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1986) 10-11, and 19.

75. U.S. Department of Defense. 12 Books. United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-67 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1971) Book 10, 738. (Hereafter cited as DOD, U.S. Vietnam Relations).

76. U.S. covert operations in Thailand were not unprecedented. The Central Intelligence Agency had been involved in secret paramilitary training in Thailand since at least 1951. This secret U.S.-Thai project will be explored in greater detail in chapter three.

77. SEATO was dissolved in 1977.

78. George Modelski, ed., SEATO: Six Crisis (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1962), 292. See also Herring, America's Longest War, 44-5.

79. Vanida Trongyounggoon Tuttle, "Thai-American Relations, 1950-1954." (Ph.D. diss., Washington State University, 1982), 148.

80. The introductions of the SEATO and NATO agreements were identical. See Tuttle, "Thai-American Relations," 145.

81. Modelski, SEATO, 290, and as cited in Tuttle, "Thai-American Relations," 146. Ironically, in later years, the

Manila Pact would be used to justify the introduction of U.S. military forces into Southeast Asia. This was despite the fact that U.S. negotiators in Manila were told to reject any treaty language which called for unilateral U.S. military action or the commitment of American ground forces in Southeast Asia. Further, U.S. officials insisted that America would act only against Communist aggression and any SEATO military response would require the participation of one or more of the European signatories. Professor Gibbons makes clear that this position "appears to have been ignored by policymakers during the Johnson administration, when SEATO was said to be one basis for the decision to send U.S. forces, including ground forces, into combat in Vietnam." Gibbons, U.S. and the Vietnam War, Part I, 272-3. Similarly, Professor Kahin presents good evidence that, while overt U.S. military action was considered undesirable, U.S. policymakers were intent on meeting Communist influence in Southeast Asia with "covert operations on a large and effective scale." Kahin, Intervention, 73-5.

82. Gibbons, U.S. and the Vietnam War, Part I, 271.

83. Tuttle, "Thai-American Relations," 148.

84. Randolph, The U.S. and Thailand, 10-1. See also Wiwat Mungkandi, "Thai-American Relations in Historical Perspective," in United States-Thailand Relations, Karl D. Jackson and Wiwat Mungkandi, eds., (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, U of California, 1986) 14-5.

85. Robert J. Muscat, Thailand and the United States: Development, Security, and Foreign Aid (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990) 11. For a Thai perspective of U.S. foreign aid to Thailand see Nongnuth Kimanonth, "The U.S. Foreign Aid Factor in Thai Development, 1950-1975," in Thai-American Relations in Contemporary Affairs, ed. Hans H. Indorf (Singapore: Executive Publications, 1982) 138-47. See also J. Alexander Caldwell, American Economic Aid to Thailand (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath, 1974) 38-41.
86. Muscat, Thailand and the U.S., 20.
87. Randolph, The U.S. and Thailand, 14-5. "Technical and economic assistance made available through the USOM totalled up to approximately \$440.1 million for the period from September 1950 to June 1965. Of this, a sum of \$365.9 was given in the form of grants; and the rest [\$74.2] was made up of loans." Ganganath Jha, Foreign Policy of Thailand (New Delhi: Radiant, 1979) 39. USOM was the country level office of the International Cooperation Agency (ICA), which later became the Agency for International Development (AID).
88. Randolph, The U.S. and Thailand, 15.
89. As cited in Jha, Foreign Policy of Thailand, 46.

CHAPTER II

NEUTRALITY THAT DOESN'T WORK

On 21 July 1954, a day after signing the "Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Laos," the Kingdom of Laos declared that it was "resolved never to pursue a policy of aggression and will never permit the territory of Laos to be used in the furtherance of such a policy."¹ This noble objective was doomed to fail.

Attempting to Make Geneva Work

The Geneva settlement affirmed political independence for Laos but did little to offer the Kingdom military protection from the Pathet Lao and North Vietnam. However, because the Lao Communists showed no inclination toward combat without Vietnamese assistance, the domestic threat could be relieved by assimilating the Pathet Lao leaders into the political process. Since the twenty-five thousand man Royal Lao Army was no match for the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN), the Lao government could only hope that international pressure would deter North Vietnamese aggression.²

Reconciliation between the Vientiane government and the Pathet Lao proved difficult. Major quarrels over election laws and the dispatch of government soldiers to Pathet Lao "assembly areas" in Phong Saly and Sam Neua provinces caused the Lao Communists to boycott the general elections of 1955.³ Nevertheless, Souvanna Phouma, who had become prime minister

on 21 March 1956, pursued rapprochement with Souphanouvong and in August the brothers issued two joint declarations. The first called for a joint commission to "work out details of a cease-fire, the administration of the provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua, and the integration of the Pathet Lao fighting forces into the Royal Army." The second agreement declared the intention to form a "National Union Government that would include representatives of the Pathet Lao."⁴

Further meetings in December 1956 produced agreement on the rights of the Pathet Lao to "conduct political activities like any other Laotian political party" and the promise that "after the formation of the coalition government, the administration as well as the fighting forces in the provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua would be placed under the authority of the new government."⁵ Despite considerable dissent from the Lao National Assembly, a coalition government was formed in November 1957 and the two provinces were formally returned to Royal control.⁶ Prince Souphanouvong and Phoumi Vongvichit, another key Pathet Lao leader, assumed prominent positions in the new administration.⁷ The Lao government had taken a decided turn toward the left, a political change which caused American officials considerable discomfort.

The U.S. Presence in Laos

In September of 1954, Charles W. Yost became the first U.S. Ambassador to Laos.⁸ Four months later the United States established a United States Overseas Mission (USOM) and set

about to quickly bring American "know how" to bear on the myriad problems of Laos.⁹ Over the next year the Mission funded eleven nonmilitary projects at a cost of about \$1.4 million. These programs included planned improvements to agriculture, public health, civil administration, and education.¹⁰ The primary focus of USOM spending, however, was defense related.¹¹ "The ratio of funds devoted to military and internal security purposes as compared to the amounts obligated to economic and technical assistance was approximately 4 to 1."¹² This responsibility created numerous problems for a small embassy which was not structured or staffed to administer a military assistance program.

The difficulties at the U.S. Mission in Laos posed a diplomatic dilemma for Washington. Article Six of the Geneva settlement on Laos banned "the introduction into Laos of any reinforcements of troops or military personnel from outside Laotian territory."¹³ The Eisenhower administration judged the placement in Laos of a U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), the standard method of managing foreign military aid programs, a contravention of the Geneva provision.¹⁴ Consequently, while the United States was determined to provide military aid to the Kingdom of Laos, Washington could not appear openly to violate the Geneva agreement.

The Program Evaluations Office

The predicament was solved in December 1955 when the U.S. State Department placed the management of American military

assistance to Laos under the control of a thinly disguised, but politically defensible, military aid organization called the Program Evaluations Office (PEO). This decision set the precedent for nearly two decades of covert U.S. military aid to the Royal Lao government.

The PEO was initially staffed by reserve, retired, and former U.S. military personnel who were given U.S. State Department Foreign Service Officer (FSO) rank.¹⁵

The mission of the PEO was two-fold: first to advise the US Ambassador and USOM on the military needs of the RLG [Royal Lao government] and assist in preparing the requests for MAP [Military Assistance Program] funds, and second to provide end-use observers for the military material already furnished to Laos.... PEO operated as a separate agency, with the Chief of PEO (CHPEO) acting as a member of the Country Team and reporting directly to the Ambassador. On purely military matters CHPEO reported directly to Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), and DOD [Department of Defense], with information to the Ambassador.¹⁶

In February 1957, Brigadier General Rothwell H. Brown, U.S. Army, retired, who had previously held senior MAAG positions in South Vietnam and Pakistan, was appointed CHPEO. The organization expanded its activities to include "preparation of training plans and programs [and] improvements in training aids and instructor methods." The PEO, grudgingly respectful of the Geneva prohibition against non-French military training units in Laos, perforce worked through the authorized French Military Mission (FMM).¹⁷ This unsatisfactory arrangement would soon change.

From Left to Right

Laos held its national elections in May 1958, and the Pathet Lao and their supporters won thirteen seats in the fifty-nine seat Lao Assembly.¹⁸ The U.S. Embassy, which had been working hard to prevent any Communist representation in the government,¹⁹ was greatly disturbed by Souvanna's earlier cabinet appointments and then stunned by the left-wing election victories. The U.S. Embassy halted all economic aid to Laos on 30 June, forcing Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma from office.²⁰

Phoui Sananikone, a pro-West diplomat, succeeded Souvanna in August 1958 and formed a cabinet which included four members of the anti-Communist "Committee for the Defense of National Interests" (CDNI), also known as les Jeunes.²¹ In the shuffle Phoui dropped Souphanouvong and Phoumi Vongvichit from the new government and appointed Souvanna Phouma Ambassador to France.²² The U.S. responded by resuming aid in October.²³

On 11 February 1959, Phoui announced that his government considered "the application of the Geneva Agreements as fully accomplished and that, therefore, Laos was no longer bound by its provisions."²⁴ Three months later, in a move designed to weaken the Pathet Lao, the prime minister ordered the integration of the Pathet Lao military forces into the Royal Lao army.²⁵ On instructions from Souphanouvong the rebels refused and declared their intention to fight. This act of defiance prompted the Lao government to place Souphanouvong

and several of his supporters under house arrest in Vientiane.²⁶

By July 1957, the Pathet Lao had consolidated its military forces and launched an offensive against the Lao government.²⁷ Souphanouvong and fifteen other Pathet Lao leaders were then charged by the government with treason and placed in a jail just outside the capital. Souvanna's attempt to bring the Pathet Lao into the political process had failed and the right-wing instigated purge reignited the civil war.²⁸

The Heintges Plan

In November 1958 the Pentagon sent Brigadier General John A. Heintges, U.S. Army, to Laos to study the situation and recommend changes. After completing a comprehensive review, in February 1959 General Heintges replaced General Brown as commander of the Program Evaluations Office.²⁹ Heintges favored an increased role for the PEO and deftly coordinated a new military assistance plan with Lao and French officials in Vientiane. Formal discussions of the plan in Washington and Paris resulted in the signing, in late May, of a U.S.-French Memorandum of Understanding. On 23 July the Lao government, at Washington's urging, publicly "requested" increased military aid from the United States.³⁰

The Heintges plan allowed the U.S. a much expanded and direct role in Lao military training. One of the most important provisions permitted U.S. "civilians" to act as "deputies" to French supervisors in the four Lao military

regions. The United States could finally get men into the field where, Washington hoped, they could introduce the FAR to more effective American training methods. The plan essentially elbowed the French Training Mission aside.³¹

To carry out the expanded mission the Departments of Defense and State approved:

17 additional PEO personnel spaces and authority to contract for the services of an additional 103 ECCOIL technicians. By the end of 1959 the authorized strength of the PEO was 175 plus 190 contract personnel and 149 temporary-duty (TDY) Special Forces personnel for a total authorized strength of 514. Of the total of 514 authorized at the end of 1959, 428 were on hand, an actual strength 21 times greater than a year earlier.³²

The Eastern Construction Company in Laos (ECCOIL), headed by "Frisco" Johnny San Juan, a Filipino with close ties to Philippines President Ramon Magsaysay, had first come to Laos in March 1959. The ECCOIL cadre, combat veterans of World War II and Philippine government campaigns against the Communist Huk guerrillas, were a "third country" element which would remain an important part of the U.S. military aid program to Laos for many years to come.³³

The other major new component in the U.S. strategy was the deployment in Laos of U.S. Army Special Forces Field Training Teams (FTTs). Twelve eight-man modified "A" teams and a control detachment from the 7th Special Forces Group at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, arrived in Laos between 24 and 31 July 1959. Although the FTTs remained in Laos for no more than six months before being replaced by fresh "Green Berets"

from the U.S., their in-country presence and the plan they sought to implement represented a critical change in U.S. policy toward Southeast Asia.³⁴ Unfortunately, the six month tours hampered efforts to build foreign language proficiency and important professional relationships between the Special Forces soldiers and their trainees.³⁵

The CIA and les Jeunes

In December 1959 a political crisis erupted in the Phoui Sananikone government. The prime minister, troubled by the growing strength of the Lao right-wing, decided to remove the CDNI members of his cabinet. With CIA encouragement, the Lao army reacted by seizing control of the government. Brigadier General Phoumi Nosavan, one of the CDNI members Phoui sought to remove, emerged as leader of the coup.³⁶ The general orchestrated the formation of a new government and Kou Abhay, head of the King's Council and a Phoumi supporter, became prime minister on 7 January 1960.³⁷

National elections were held as scheduled in April 1960, but the Lao army and CIA insured there was no repeat of the earlier Pathet Lao victories. In the Communist stronghold of Sam Neua, the Pathet Lao candidate "received a total of 13 votes to the successful candidate's 6,508." In southern Laos, a Pathet Lao candidate received four votes to the opposition's 18,189, "although there were at least 5 members of his immediate family eligible to vote for him."³⁸ According to Arthur Dommen, "CIA agents participated in the election

rigging, with or without the authority of the American Ambassador." A U.S. embassy officer reported that he had seen "CIA agents distribute bagfuls of money to village headmen."³⁹ Following the right-wing victory, Prince Somsanith, a close associate of General Phoumi, was named by the king to succeed Kou Abhay as prime minister.⁴⁰

The Great Escape

One of the new regime's first scheduled tasks was to put Souphanouvong and the other confined Pathet Lao leaders on public trial. However, Souphanouvong and his comrades escaped on 23 May and made their way to Sam Neua province. According to prisoner Sisana Sisane, the Pathet Lao leaders simply "prepared the guards with political education" and were able to slip away.⁴¹ Since the jail was located within the headquarters of the Lao Provost Marshal (Chief of Military Police), the escape was viewed by most diplomatic observers as yet another embarrassing demonstration of the Royal Lao government's ineptitude. Or was it?

Royal Lao Army Major General Oudone Sananikone, writing in 1978, says:

the escape was engineered and ordered by none other than Phoumi Nosavan himself. A truck was provided, the gate was unlocked, the guards assisted, and the Pathet Lao leaders drove out of Vientiane.⁴²

It is impossible to know what really happened that day. Souphanouvong and his fellow prisoners were skilled political propagandists quite capable of eliciting support from both

common soldiers and senior Lao army officers. A public trial would have created unwanted problems for General Phoumi and the new government.⁴³ Therefore, it seems likely that the escape was the result of long talks with sympathetic guards and the agreeable and mostly non-violent nature of the Lao army high command.

The Phoumi-controlled government virtually guaranteed the United States a commanding influence in Laotian affairs. By early August 1960 Washington was optimistic about the future of Laos and quite unsuspecting of the next bizarre turn in Lao politics.

The Kong Le Coup

In addition to the threats of internal rebellion and external invasion, longstanding bickering and political intrigue amongst the Lao military and civilian elite also seriously undermined the stability of Laos. The king was no more than a compliant symbol who routinely acquiesced to the prevailing authority in Vientiane. Real power in Laos was vested in about twenty powerful lowland Lao families.⁴⁴

Throughout the summer of 1960 Captain Kong Le,⁴⁵ an aggressive American trained FAR battalion commander, became increasingly exasperated with his government.⁴⁶ On 9 August 1960, reacting to widespread corruption and the indifferent treatment of common soldiers, Kong Le and his U.S. Special Forces trained paratroop battalion seized control of Vientiane. Kong Le declared he would end corruption in the

military and political bureaucracies and stop the Lao civil war. Most of all, he wanted an end to foreign interference in his country. He later claimed "American aid had corrupted many government officials. The goal of U.S. aid was good, but the program created too many opportunities for corruption. It had to be stopped."⁴⁷ Kong Le insisted the government of Laos return to a "policy of genuine neutrality" which, he believed, would allow the country to avoid overpowering foreign influences.⁴⁸

The coup met little resistance. A day earlier Prime Minister Somsanith, General Phoumi, and most of the Lao Cabinet had flown to Luang Prabang for a conference with King Savang Vatthana.⁴⁹ General Phoumi, upon learning of the coup, flew first to Bangkok for consultations with Thai Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat, and then went to his personal power base in the southern Lao town of Savannakhet to prepare for counter action. Somsanith and the cabinet ministers awaited developments in Luang Prabang.⁵⁰

Arthur Dommen portrays initial U.S. reaction to the coup as indecisive and ambiguous:

Messages from the State Department in the days following the coup advised Ambassador Brown to take such action as would remove Kong Le from the scene as expeditiously as possible. The messages, however, gave no specific orders as to how Brown should effect this. As days went on, the State Department messages to Brown became less and less coherent. Conflicting suggestions would appear in the same telegram.⁵¹

Consequently, newly arrived Ambassador Winthrop G. Brown

exerted little calming influence over the spreading chaos.

Kong Le, recognizing his political and administrative limitations, sought assistance in the formation of a new government from Souvanna Phouma. The prince responded favorably, but insisted the National Assembly agree to any change to the government. Under pressure from Kong Le and Souvanna supporters, the Assembly voted on 13 August to replace Somsanith with Souvanna.⁵² Prince Somsanith stepped down and Souvanna formed a new cabinet on 16 August.

General Phoumi, however, was unwilling to accept the change. Despite a visit from Souvanna and an initial pledge to join the new cabinet, the general decided to stage his own coup.⁵³

Two Governments

On 10 September 1960, General Phoumi Nosavan announced the formation of a "Revolutionary Committee" headed by fellow southerner Prince Boun Oum. Phoumi abrogated the Lao constitution and, with the assistance of a Thai imposed blockade of Vientiane, prepared to retake control of the government.⁵⁴ The United States, faced with a legitimate government in Vientiane headed by a neutralist and a rebel group in Savannakhet led by a right-wing general friendly to the U.S., initially took a wait and see attitude.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, Souvanna pressed the United States, which had already suspended cash grant aid to Vientiane at the time of the coup, to overturn the Thai blockade. The U.S. refused,

and Souvanna announced on 4 October his intention to establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. The prince then further damaged his relations with the U.S. by inviting the Pathet Lao to participate in discussions aimed at a new coalition government. The Pathet Lao responded favorably and ordered its units to "avoid clashes with the forces loyal to Souvanna Phouma, in the interests of combining in the fight against General Phoumi's troops." Concurrently, "the Pathet Lao capitalized on the internal conflict ... [and seized] full control of the villages and territories in the mountainous areas."⁵⁶

The United States halted all military aid to the Vientiane government on 7 October and announced that former Ambassador to Laos J. Graham Parsons, now Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, would conduct personal negotiations with Souvanna. Parsons arrived in Vientiane on 12 October and presented the prime minister with three conditions for U.S. support: negotiations with the Pathet Lao must be broken off; a guarantee that Souvanna would negotiate with General Phoumi; and the movement of the Royal Lao administrative government to Luang Prabang where, Washington believed, the king could exert a conservative influence. Souvanna Phouma immediately rejected the conditions and decided to look elsewhere for assistance.⁵⁷

The following day Souvanna began negotiations with Aleksandr N. Abramov, the recently arrived Soviet Ambassador

to Laos. They reached an agreement "in principle," and the prime minister announced in late October that he would be "very happy" to receive Soviet assistance. The United States actively began efforts to topple the Souvanna Phouma government.⁵⁸

A "Rump" PEO

U.S. forces and material were an important part of General Phoumi's plan to retake the Laotian capital. Shortly after the Kong Le coup the U.S. Embassy established a Deputy Chief, Program Evaluations Office in Savannakhet and manned it with about fifteen officers and twenty-five enlisted men. Following Souvanna Phouma's decision to negotiate with the Pathet Lao, the U.S. Embassy ordered this "southern PEO" to:

arrange for organizing, training, and equipping Phoumi's forces and to produce a campaign plan whose details were essentially US but were presented to Phoumi's subordinate commanders as Phoumi's plan.⁵⁹

Air America, no stranger to Laos and covert activity, was ordered by the CIA to deliver supplies to General Phoumi's forces in southern Laos. According to an official U.S. Air Force history, "Substantial deliveries were made by [Air America] contract C-46s and C-47s to the royalist base at Savannakhet."⁶⁰ The Phoumi forces were also augmented by the arrival of two hundred Lao paratroops who had just completed training in Thailand. The PEO brought the men to Savannakhet in contravention of Souvanna's orders.⁶¹

The Soviet and Chinese Factor

In early December Russian planes began ferrying fuel and military equipment into the Lao capital.⁶² Quinim Pholsena, a member of Souvanna's cabinet, had signed a deal with the Russians which:

in exchange for a formal alliance between Kong Le's troops and the Pathet Lao, the Russians would airlift into Laos arms and supplies for the resistance against General Phoumi's American-supplied troops. [On 11 December] in full view of American observers, olive-drab Ilyushins were unloading six 105-mm howitzers complete with ammunition and North Vietnamese gun crews to man them.⁶³

According to the U.S. State Department, "the Soviets made at least 34 flights to Vientiane between December 3 and December 14, 1960."⁶⁴

The People's Republic of China (PRC) was not a disinterested party in this Lao government version of the "musical chairs" game. American involvement in both the ouster of the earlier Souvanna government and the coup against Phoui Sananikone had confirmed Chinese suspicions of U.S. motives in the region.

The impending collapse of the neutralist oriented Kong Le-Souvanna Phouma government was viewed by Peking as yet another blow to Chinese Communist influence in Laos, with a corresponding gain for the U.S. In November Souvanna had agreed "to accept aid from Peking and Hanoi and to send an economic and cultural delegation to both capitals." A Phoumi dominated government would reverse this policy and the Chinese

foresaw an even stronger and undesirable American presence in Laos.⁶⁵

Phoumi's Victory

By late November 1960 General Phoumi's army, with the support of U.S. advisors, Thai technicians, and Air America, had begun a march up National Route 13 toward Vientiane.⁶⁶ On 9 December, as Phoumi's troops came within striking distance of the capital, Souvanna delegated his powers to the "High Command of the Army" and left for exile in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.⁶⁷

On 12 December General Phoumi gathered thirty eight members of the National Assembly in Savannakhet. The representatives passed a motion of no confidence in Souvanna's now exiled administration and the next day the king approved a change in government. Prince Boun Oum became prime minister. The U.S. announced its full support of the new government and Phoumi was "politically free" to retake Vientiane.⁶⁸

Phoumi's units launched their attack on 13 December and, after three days of heavy artillery fire in which more than five hundred civilians were killed and injured, the Kong Le forces withdrew from the city.⁶⁹ An American diplomat celebrated with a champagne party, while the Russian ambassador "watched a group of Phoumi's soldiers pull down and destroy the Soviet flag."⁷⁰

A Neutralist-Pathet Lao Base on the Plain of Jars

Kong Le and his men easily made their way north along National Route 13. Resupplied by Soviet IL-14 aircraft, the Neutralists successfully captured the small town of Vang Vieng located fifty-five miles from Vientiane. On 31 December several Soviet aircraft landed at Vang Vieng, picked up the rebels, and successfully parachuted Kong Le and his soldiers onto the southern edge of the Plain of Jars. The combined Pathet Lao-Kong Le forces then drove the Royal government soldiers off the plain. "By 3 January 1961, every strategic road junction on the plain was under the control of pro-communist troops." The Soviets quickly adjusted their airlift to the plain.⁷¹

Lieutenant Colonel Butler B. Toland, Jr., U.S. Air Force Attache to Laos, first obtained photographic evidence of this escalation in Soviet aid on 16 December 1960. Colonel Toland, flying a U.S. Air Force VC-47 from Luang Prabang to Vientiane, accidentally sighted a Soviet aircraft circling near Vang Vieng. He closed on the IL-14 and, from a distance of about one hundred feet, photographed the transport as it dropped supplies. After about ten minutes the Soviet plane turned north and Toland flew on to Vientiane.⁷²

A week later, two U.S. Air Force Assistant Air Attaches were flying the VC-47 on a reconnaissance mission over the Plain of Jars when the aircraft was struck by .50 caliber machine gun rounds from a suspected communist position. "The

radio operator was struck by a ricocheting bullet. About 14 or 15 holes were sustained in the aircraft."⁷³ This was the first incident in Southeast Asia of a U.S. Air Force aircraft flown by active duty military pilots being struck by communist ground-fire.⁷⁴

Moving Toward Superpower Confrontation

On the international political front, Washington and Moscow were trading allegations of interference in Laotian affairs. In a diplomatic note of 13 December, the Soviets charged the U.S. with "flouting the sovereign rights of the Laotian government headed by Prince Souvanna Phouma and with extending overt support to the rebel forces of Phoumi Nosavan." The U.S. responded on 17 December by condemning the "Soviet action in airlifting weapons and ammunition in Soviet planes to rebel military forces fighting the loyal armed forces of the Royal government."⁷⁵ Three days later the U.S. increased its airlift support to Laos. At the direction of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), the U.S. Navy transferred four H-34 helicopters to Air America and readied a U.S. Marine Corps maintenance and mobile training team to assist the CIA in resupplying the FAR.⁷⁶

Just as U.S. aerial support to General Phoumi's forces was an important factor in reclaiming Vientiane from Kong Le, the Soviet airlift was equally significant in the resupply of the Pathet Lao and their new Neutralist allies. During the final two weeks of 1960 the Soviets "flew more than 180

sorties into Laos in support of Kong Le and the Pathe⁺ Lao."⁷⁷

The airlift was also quite exceptional. According to Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Georgy M. Pushkin, the Soviet airlift was, "apart from the Second World War, ... the highest priority Soviet supply operation since the Revolution."⁷⁸

Soviet author N. I. Ivanov would later comment:

In this crucial moment for the Souvanna Phouma government and for all of Laos, the Soviet Union decisively came to the defense of the Neutralist government and its prime minister, Souvanna Phouma, ... [enabling it] to carry out a policy of peace and neutrality, and consolidation of the patriotic forces for the struggle against the internal and external reaction.⁷⁹

In a very tragic sense, by December 1960 the conflict in Laos had developed into a war supported by competing external forces. Moreover, the increasing levels of Soviet and American air power in Laos underscored the unyielding determination of Moscow and Washington to support their surrogates, even at the risk of a direct superpower confrontation in the mountains and jungles of Laos.

ENDNOTES FOR CHAPTER II

- 1 Randle, Geneva, 609.
2. In 1954 the Pathet Lao had an army of between fifteen hundred and three thousand men. Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 57. As mentioned earlier, during the Franco-Vietminh war the Vietnamese committed some forty thousand troops to Laos. For a review of the origins of the Royal Lao Army by a former Royal Lao army general see Oudone Sananikone, The Royal Lao Army and U.S. Army Advice and Support (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1978) 14-30. Prior to fleeing his country General Sananikone was Chief of Staff of the Royal Lao Army and the last Under Secretary of Defense of the Lao Armed Forces.
3. Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 56.
4. Goldstein, American Policy, 110.
5. Ibid, 111.
6. As a result, Souvanna resigned his post in May. He was reinstated in August when the politicians were unable to form a government without him. Ibid, 114.
7. Souphanouvong became Minister of Plans, Reconstruction, and Urbanism. Phoumi Vongvichit was made Minister of Cults and Fine Arts. Goldstein, American Policy, 117. Phoumi, the son of a provincial governor and a former civil servant under the French, would become one of the most important members of

the Pathet Lao. Dommen, Conflict, 76. Phoumi is presently Acting President of the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

8. Prior to Yost's arrival the "U.S. diplomatic presence in Laos consisted of a single Foreign Service Officer, who did his own typing." Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 27-8.

9. U.S. assistance was made possible under the terms of the December 1950 Pentilateral defense pact and a September 1951 U.S.-Lao economic assistance agreement. Roswell B. Wing, et al., "Case Study of US Counterinsurgency Operations in Laos, 1955-1962." (McLean, Virginia: Research Analysis Corporation, 1964) E4. The size of the U.S. Mission in Laos increased from a "dozen or so at the end of 1954 to forty-five in the autumn of 1955 to eighty-two in August 1956 to over one hundred in December 1957." Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 29.

10. Wing, Case Study, E6. U.S. economic aid was to increase substantially. In Fiscal Years 1956 and 1957, the U.S. provided \$48.7 million and \$44.5 million, respectively. Goldstein, American Policy, 134. See also Congress, House, Committee on Government Operations, U.S. Aid Operations in Laos, House Report 546, 86th Cong., 1st sess., 1959, 6-9. (Hereafter cited as U.S., Aid Operations).

11. The U.S. government believed military assistance to Laos was permitted under Article Nine of the Geneva settlement. The Article stated, "Upon the entry into force of the present Agreement and in accordance with the declaration made at the Geneva Conference by the Royal Government of Laos on July 20,

1954, the introduction into Laos of armaments, munitions and military equipment of all kinds is prohibited with the exception of a specified quantity of armaments in categories specified as necessary for the defence of Laos." Randle, Geneva 1954, 584.

12. This ratio is based on U.S. expenditures from 1955-62. Wing, Case Study, E5-E6.

13. A French training mission to the Royal Lao Army (FAR) and two French military bases were exempted. French forces were directed not to exceed fifty-five hundred troops. Randle, Geneva 1954, 583-4.

14. Goldstein, American Policy, 166.

15. My interview with Jack H. Hansel, Hilo, Hawaii, 27 October 1990. Mr. Hansel was a PEO employee. PEO manning "consisted of six persons during the first year and an average of 22 during the second and third years." Wing, Case Study, A10.

16. Wing, Case Study, A10. MAP funds were made available to foreign governments on a nonreimbursable (grant) basis under the provisions of the Mutual Security Acts of 1949, 1951, 1954, and later the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961. The aid was designed "to help strengthen the forces of freedom by aiding peoples of less developed friendly countries."

Department of the Air Force, Frederick J. St. Jean, Terrance W. McClain, and Ronald C. Hartwig, "Twenty-Three Years of Military Assistance to Laos." (Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, Alabama, March 1975) 5-6.

17. Wing, Case Study, A14, B6, and Gravel, Pentagon Papers, V:252. The frustrated PEO felt compelled to undertake some activities without the consent of the American ambassador to Laos. On at least two occasions between 1957 and 1958 the PEO arranged for the training of small numbers of Lao army personnel in Thailand. This instruction, under Project ERAWAN, was carried out with the full cooperation of the U.S. MAAG to Thailand and the Royal Thai army. Wing, Case Study, B9. There were problems with some of the Lao students. Arthur Dommen reports "Lao officers sent for training to Thailand did not even bother to show up for classes." Dommen, Conflict, 139.

18. Toye, Buffer State or Battlefield, 112.

19. One of the embassy's efforts was a pre-election crash project called "Operation Booster Shot." Intended to boost the image of the Royal Lao government in rural areas, the program included "well-digging, irrigation projects, repair of schools, temples, and roads; altogether more than ninety work projects." The U.S. Ambassador to Laos later testified to Congress that he had "struggled for sixteen months to prevent a coalition government." Cited in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, V:253, and 255. See also Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 61-4.

20. Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 64.

21. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 66. Goldstein describes les Jeunes (the Young Ones) as "students just returned from

abroad, junior officials, and young army officers." Goldstein, American Policy, 143. The CIA was instrumental in the creation of the CDNI. See Roger Hilsman, To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967) 114-5.

22. Dommen, Conflict, 111.

23. Toye, Buffer State or Battlefield, 118-9.

24. Some U.S. newspapers viewed this statement as a prelude to sending additional military aid to the Royal Lao government. Fall, Anatomy, 97. By this time the International Control Commission (ICC), the supervisory and inspection body established by the Geneva agreements to oversee implementation of the settlement, had halted their operations in Laos. Dommen, Conflict, 110. See also Randle, Geneva 1954, 522-3.

25. As noted above, the integration was part of the December 1956 settlement between Souvanna and Souphanouvong.

26. Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 67. One of the Pathet Lao battalions awaiting integration had been placed under guard at a government base on the Plain of Jars. On 18 May 1959 the Pathet Lao unit escaped and successfully reached the safety of the Vietnamese border near Sam Neua. "That the Pathet Lao did so [escaped] with 700 men, their families, chickens, pigs, weapons, and household articles is testimony to the military skill which the Royal Army was to

display in many subsequent encounters with the Pathet Lao."

Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 71.

27. Goldstein, American Policy, 152.

28. During an interview, Sisana Sisane, formerly Pathet Lao Minister of Information and presently Chairman of the LPDR Social Science Research Committee, called the Vientiane purge the "worst mistake of the Royal Lao government." The Pathet Lao "could not have achieved victory otherwise. It placed the people on the side of the Pathet Lao. Without the arrests of the senior leadership there would have been no issues. This created the hatred of the people." Sisana was one of those interned with Souphanouvong. He described their jail as a "horse stable." My interview with Sisana Sisane, Vientiane, Laos, 20 August 1990. This point of view is also expressed in official LPDR histories of the war. See Phoumi Vongvichit, Laos and the Victorious Struggle of the Lao People Against U.S. Neo-Colonialism (Sam Neua, Laos: Neo Lao Haksat Editions, 1969) 118.

29. The decision to send General Heintges, an active officer, was made by the Defense Department's Office of International Affairs (ISA) in consultation with the Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC). Wing, Case Study, B11. Admiral Harry D. Felt, CINCPAC (1958-64), recalled later that the early PEO "was a terrible organization and there was scandal coming out about this. It was ... composed mostly of retired military people who hadn't any experience in that part of the world but

needed a job, I guess. We replaced all these worthless people." Admiral Felt thought very highly of General Heintges, remarking that he was a "wonderful guy ... [who] was fluent in French." "Reminiscences of Admiral Harry Donald Felt, U.S. Navy, Retired," Vol II. (U.S. Naval Institute, Annapolis, Maryland, 1974) 510, and my interview with Admiral Harry D. Felt, U.S. Navy, retired, Honolulu, Hawaii, 1 March 1990. Admiral Felt has graciously allowed me to quote from his oral history. In 1959 corruption within the U.S. Mission to Laos was the subject of an extensive Congressional investigation. U.S., Aid Operations, 1-5. See also Goldstein, American Policy, 181-93.

30. Wing, Case Study, B11-B12, and C10. For the official version see U.S. Department of State, The Situation in Laos (September 1959) 23. In the midst of the negotiations between France, Laos, and the U.S, the American Ambassador to Thailand recommended that an all-Asian military advisory group be organized. He suggested a unit comprised of Filipinos, Vietnamese, Thais, Pakistanis, and Koreans, commanded by a Filipino retired general. Wing, Case Study, A15. There is no further information on the ambassador's plan, or whether it was ever seriously considered.

31. Wing, Case Study, B12. A detailed account of the Heintges Plan is found in *ibid.*, C79-C80.

32. *Ibid.*, B13-B14. See also Rod Paschall, "White Star in

Laos," in Pawns of War: Cambodia and Laos, ed. Arnold R. Isaacs, et al. (Boston: Boston Publishing, 1987) 64.

33. Gravel, Pentagon Papers, II:647, and Wing, Case Study, 29.

34. Wing, Case Study, C9 and C17.

35. Pete H. Sanchez, letter to the author, 6 January 1989. Mr. Sanchez was a Special Forces medic in Laos. See also Department of Defense, Deputy Chief, Joint United States Military Advisory Group Thailand, "Final Report of Military Assistance and Advisory Group, Laos," APO 146, San Francisco, California, 11 December 1962, p. 7. (Document in my possession).

36. Phoumi, a southern Lao related to Thai Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat, had once been chief of staff to Prince Souphanouvong. He received an army commission in 1950 and served as a military advisor at the Geneva conference. A 1957 graduate of the French War College, he was bright, ambitious, and aggressive. Phoumi was just the sort of person the U.S. military and the CIA favored to lead the Lao army and, perhaps, the country. However, many in the U.S. Embassy, including the ambassador, believed Phoumi was simply an opportunist. Dommen, Conflict, 127-8.

37. Ibid., 129.

38. Ibid., 133.

39. Ibid., 133-4. Hilsman also describes this CIA activity, but adds "The Communist agents also distributed money, but

they added terrorism, too, including assassination." Hilsman, To Move A Nation, 122.

40. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 88.

41. My interview with Sisana Sisane, 20 August 1990. See also Toye, Buffer State or Battlefield 135-6, Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 73-4, and Vongvichit, Laos and the Victorious Struggle, 126.

42. Sananikone, The Royal Lao Army, 60. General Sananikone was a member of the CDNI.

43. Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 73.

44. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 14. During an interview Kong Le told me that the families squabbled interminably over control of the kingdom's commerce and armed forces. The introduction of massive amounts of U.S. aid intensified the competition and corruption became endemic. All the while little attention was paid to the severe problems facing the common folk. Not surprisingly, the country's mostly illiterate and poor minorities became increasingly disaffected. My interview with Major General Kong Le, coup leader and formerly Commander of the Lao Neutralist army, Honolulu, Hawaii, 18 April 1989. Of note, Kong Le was in Hawaii to raise money for his "resistance army in Laos." The army, according to a Kong Le associate, numbered forty-seven thousand armed men. During his 1989 visit, and another in September 1990, Kong Le attempted to convince the local Lao community to fund armed resistance efforts against the LPDR

government. Reaction from the Lao in Hawaii ranged from indifference to unqualified support. During his visits Kong Le was always surrounded by sycophants, many of whom reside in the mainland U.S., and slept and ate in the homes of Lao families. My personal observations. Kong Le permanently resides in Paris, France. The figure of forty-seven thousand men is substantially inflated. Informed sources in Thailand told me Kong Le's forces numbered less than a thousand. My confidential interview in Bangkok, Thailand, 17 September 1990.

45. Kong Le is Phu Tai, a sub-group of the Lao Tai.

46. Kong Le's unit, the "2d Parachute Battalion was an elite, hard-fighting unit. Kong Le ... had led it on many successful operations in Sam Neua as well as in southern Laos." Sananikone, The Royal Lao Army, 61. Kong Le received U.S. "Ranger" training at Fort McKinley, Philippines. There were ten American advisors assigned to his battalion. Toye, Buffer State or Battlefield, 139-42. A former U.S. Army Special Forces medic who worked with Kong Le's unit had high praise for the officer's "determination and sincerity," but believed him to be "politically naive." He believes Kong Le tired of his unit, the "fire brigade," being placed in the toughest combat situations while senior Royal army officers lived in safety and luxury. My confidential interview with a former U.S. Army enlisted man who is presently a senior U.S. government official, Bangkok, Thailand, 16 August 1990.

47. My interview with Kong Le, 18 April 1989.
48. Fall, Anatomy, 187.
49. The men were discussing funeral arrangements for the late King Sisavang Vong. Sisavang died in October 1959, but a funeral was postponed until an appropriate sandalwood cremation vessel could be found. The End of Nowhere, 92.
50. Ibid., 92-4.
51. Dommen, Conflict, 157.
52. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 95.
53. Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 74-5.
54. Dommen, Conflict, 154-5. The blockade resulted in "the accumulation in Bangkok warehouses of 10,000 tons of U.S. aid goods destined for Laos." Fall, Anatomy, 191.
55. Hilsman, To Move a Nation, 124.
56. Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 75-6.
57. Dommen, Conflict, 159-60. Souvanna later called Secretary Parsons "the most reprehensible and nefarious of men." Cited in Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 105.
58. Dommen, Conflict, 160, and Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 76.
59. Wing, Case Study, C16.
60. Ray L. Bowers, The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia. Tactical Airlift (Washington, D.C.: Center for Air Force History, 1983) 441. It is interesting to note that Bowers chose to use the word "royalist" in describing Phoumi's forces. Souvanna, after all, was the legitimate head of the

Lao government and Phoumi, technically, was a "rebel." The remarkable nature of Lao politics is also reflected in the fact that General Phoumi, a commoner, was opposing two princes of the realm, Souvanna and Souphanouvong.

61. Dommen, Conflict, 154-5. The men had received their training in unconventional warfare and anti-guerrilla tactics under Project ERAWAN. Wing, Case Study, 28-9.

62. Dommen, Conflict, 164. See also Earl H. Tilford, Jr., "Two Scorpions in a Cup: America and the Soviet Airlift to Laos," Aerospace Historian, 3 (1980): 154.

63. Dommen, Conflict, 167.

64. Goldstein, American Policy, 217.

65. Lee, China's Policy Toward Laos, 72-3. In fact, by this time the PEO had grown to more than five hundred men. Wing, Case Study, A30.

66. Bowers, USAF Tactical Airlift, 441, and Tilford, "Two Scorpions in a Cup," 154. See chapter three for details on the Thai involvement.

67. Dommen, Conflict, 166.

68. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 118. The Soviet Union and India continued to recognize the Souvanna government, while Canada, France and Great Britain sided with the U.S. position. Dommen, Conflict, 175.

69. Fall, Anatomy, 198. See also Chalermnit Press Correspondent, Battle of Vientiane 1960 (Bangkok: Chalermnit,

1961) 1-56. The writing is uneven, but the book contains rare photographs of Vientiane and other areas of Laos.

70. Toye, Buffer State or Battlefield, 160.

71. Tilford, "Two Scorpions in a Cup," 156-7.

72. Vang Vieng is located about 55 miles north of Vientiane. Colonel Toland's pictures caused quite a stir among his superiors and were later released to the public and appeared in a number of newspapers and magazines. Colonel Toland was rewarded with the Air Force Distinguished Flying Cross. My interview (by telephone) with Lieutenant Colonel Butler B. Toland, Jr., U.S. Air Force, retired, San Antonio, Texas, 30 November 1990. See also, Department of the Air Force. Oral History Interview. Lieutenant Colonel Butler B. Toland, Jr., USAF. (Maxwell AFB, Alabama: 18 November 1974) 17-8, and 21-2. One of Colonel Toland's photographs is found in Tilford, "Two Scorpions in a Cup," 154.

73. Toland, "AF Oral History," 23, and my interview with Toland, 30 November 1990. An official U.S. Air Force history errs in describing this incident. Earl H. Tilford, Jr., reports that Colonel Toland, who was in Saigon at the time, was flying the aircraft. Earl H. Tilford, Jr., Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, 1961-1975 (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, U.S. Air Force, 1980) 33.

74. As indicated above, U.S. Air Force aircraft covertly flown by Civil Air Transport pilots were hit, with tragic results, by communist gunners while supporting the French at Dien Bien

Phu. See chapter one, footnote 61. On 28 December 1960, the Attache aircraft was struck by gunfire from an IL-14 as the Americans photographed Soviet airlift operations. The VC-47 landed safely and no injuries were reported. Tilford, "Two Scorpions in a Cup," 156.

75. Cited in Department of the Air Force, Robert F. Futrell, "United States Policy Toward Southeast Asia, 1943-1968. A Chronological Compendium." Project Corona Harvest report. (Maxwell AFB, Alabama: Air University, 1 October 1968) 119-20.

76. Edward J. Marolda and Oscar P. Fitzgerald, The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict. Volume II. From Military Assistance to Combat, 1959-1965 (Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, U.S. Navy, 1986) 52. (Hereafter cited as Marolda and Fitzgerald, U.S. Navy).

77. Dwight D. Eisenhower, The White House Years: Waging Peace, 1956-61 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), 609.

78. Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, 331.

79. As cited in Langer, "The Soviet Union, China, and the Pathet Lao," 13.

CHAPTER III

CONFLICT, DIPLOMACY, AND COVERT OPERATIONS

On 31 December 1960 senior military and intelligence advisors presented President Dwight D. Eisenhower a very disquieting briefing on Laos. The Soviets were maintaining their extraordinary military aid airlift to the Pathet Lao-Neutralist forces on the Plain of Jars. Chinese and or North Vietnamese intervention in Laos seemed a distinct possibility. Despite hundreds of millions of dollars in U.S. military and economic aid the Royal Lao government appeared on the verge of losing control over more than half the kingdom. Eisenhower declared at the conclusion of the meeting "We cannot let Laos fall to the Communists even if we have to fight ... with our allies or without them."¹ Laos had become a potential flash-point for international conflict and the president "regretted deeply" that his administration had "left a legacy of strife and confusion in Laos."²

Kennedy Inherits Laos

On 19 January 1961 President-elect John F. Kennedy held a final transition meeting with President Eisenhower during which the two talked about "points of crisis, and especially on the mounting crisis in Laos." Eisenhower expressed his view that Laos was the "key to Indochina;" if necessary, the U.S. should "intervene unilaterally" to prevent a Communist takeover.³ The talk confirmed Kennedy's earlier concerns over

U.S. involvement in the Lao muddle.⁴ When he became the 35th President of the United States the next day, the strife in Laos became the first foreign policy challenge for Kennedy's new team of "action intellectuals."⁵

Meeting the Communist threat to Laos was a problem which consumed a striking amount of the new president's time. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., then a special assistant to President Kennedy, has written that in "the first two months of his administration he [Kennedy] probably spent more time on Laos than on anything else."⁶ According to Walt W. Rostow:

Kennedy was not about to see Laos fall to the communists; but every experience of the situation in his first weeks of responsibility drove him to the conclusion that American forces should not engage there, if there was anyway to avoid it.... Kennedy's task, as he saw it, was to convince the communists that he would, in fact, fight if necessary to avoid a communist takeover while seeking a political settlement.⁷

Laos, a country with little intrinsic value, had become an important chip in a deadly serious superpower poker game. According to the Pentagon Papers, the CIA concluded in early 1961 that the other governments of Southeast Asia were inclined "to regard the Laotian crisis as a symbolic test of strengths between the major powers of the West and the Communist bloc."⁸ Kennedy was cognizant that in capitals from Saigon to Moscow his reaction to events in Laos was being carefully monitored and evaluated.⁹

The Phoumi - Souvanna Gambol

The new year in Laos was marked by continued political

posturing between General Phoumi and Prince Souvanna Phouma. On 4 January 1960 the Boun Oum government received a vote of confidence from the Lao National Assembly and the king formally accepted Boun Oum and his cabinet. General Phoumi, the dominant personality in Vientiane, became Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense.

Souvanna Phouma, from his exile in Phnom Penh, rejected the investiture as illegal and continued to receive Soviet support and encouragement for his Neutralist forces.¹⁰ The prince insisted that his centrist philosophy alone could bring together the Phoumists, Neutralists, and the Pathet Lao and create a united Laotian government. Seeking support for his position and responding to a plea for reconciliation from King Savang Vatthana, Souvanna returned to Laos on 20 February.

The prince flew by Soviet aircraft to the Plain of Jars and convened a strategy meeting with his cabinet in the small town of Khang Khay. Souvanna found, settled in among the rebel Lao soldiers, Czech and North Vietnamese "information offices," an "economic and cultural delegation" from Beijing, a North Vietnamese tent hospital, a full Soviet embassy, and a dozen Russian aircraft maintenance men. Russian 37-mm radar-directed antiaircraft guns protected the entire area. "The Plain of Jars," as Arthur Dommen aptly writes, "was becoming a mirror image of the PEO compound in Vientiane."¹¹

Following the cabinet discussions Souvanna established contact with General Phoumi's representatives and the parties

agreed to a summit meeting. Souvanna and Phoumi met in Phnom Penh in mid-March, but the talks produced little substance. In a joint announcement the leaders declared a strong opposition to foreign interference and their desire for a genuinely neutral Laos.¹² The words had a fatuous ring, however, as Phoumi returned to a government financed and armed by the United States, and Souvanna's legitimacy was propped up by an alliance with the Pathet Lao and their Communist advisors.

Seeking Solutions to the Crisis

In early February President Kennedy formed an interagency task force to examine U.S. policy toward Laos. The group included Assistant Secretary of State J. Graham Parsons, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State John Steeves, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Paul H. Nitze, NSC staffer Walt W. Rostow, and others from the military, the State Department, and the CIA. The task force held extensive meetings and in a 28 February memorandum from Walt Rostow, provided the president with an interim assessment of the situation.

Phoumi is stuck. He has been stopped by a better organized and better equipped opposition than anyone had calculated.... In addition, the good general has been politicking rather than using his forces to increase our bargaining position in the negotiations ahead.... It is believed that the time may not be inappropriate for us to make a show of strength and determination, since the Soviet air supply continues unabated.¹³

On 9 March 1961 the task force, along with Admiral Felt,

CINCPAC, met with the president and recommended a "seventeen-step escalation ladder" of possible American responses to Communist movements in Laos. The most drastic option called for the occupation of southern Laos by sixty thousand U.S. soldiers. The troops would be supported by air cover and, in the event of Chinese or Vietnamese reaction, nuclear weapons would be available for use against the Communists.¹⁴

Apart from confronting the immediate problems associated with the crisis in Laos, the presidential meeting exposed institutional differences in strategy and coordination between the Departments of State and Defense. On 10 March a concerned Walt Rostow wrote the president:

I believe you should reflect on the deeper lesson of our experience in Laos thus far. That lesson is that the Department of State has an understandable instinct to conduct pure diplomacy with minimum involvement with the CIA and the military until an acute crisis occurs. The tendency is then to turn the problem over almost wholly to those who control force, and to get the hell out. This is the pattern which produces the uneasy relations between State and the Pentagon which surfaced yesterday. This is the exact opposite of Communist policy which is to orchestrate force and diplomacy intimately at every stage. I think we must put our minds steadily to work ... on how to orchestrate diplomacy and force better.¹⁵

The president agreed and the lessons learned during the debate on Laos would soon lead Kennedy to undertake unprecedented changes in the implementation and management of U.S. foreign policy.

Signalling Resolve

At the conclusion of the 9 March meeting President

Kennedy decided to start up the "escalation ladder" and ordered an Okinawa-based U.S. contingency force, Task Force 116, to alert status. He also directed that units of the Seventh Fleet standby in the South China Sea and Gulf of Siam.¹⁶ The Soviets, according to a presidential aide, would now have to decide whether to opt for "a cease-fire and neutralization ... or American intervention."¹⁷

The Kennedy White House, after more than two months of study and debate, was setting the stage for direct U.S. military intervention in Laos. But the "action intellectuals" had also decided concurrently to pursue an unconventional solution to the Lao imbroglio.

Preparing for a Covert War

During the 9 March conference Kennedy authorized the transfer of sixteen U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) H-34 helicopters to the CIA for use by Air America.¹⁸ On 22 March three hundred U.S. Marines assigned to Task Force 116 arrived at Udorn, Thailand, located fifty miles south of Vientiane, to organize a helicopter repair and maintenance base. Six days later the H-34's were flown from a U.S. Navy ship to Bangkok, Thailand.¹⁹ The following day, military and Air America pilots flew the helicopters to Udorn. Air America thereby established its extraordinary Thailand headquarters, precipitating an operation which was to become the cornerstone of American activities in Laos.²⁰

The presidential orders of March 1961 inaugurated a

policy which would characterize American military activity in Laos for more than a dozen years; extensive CIA paramilitary operations supported by Thailand-based, covert U.S. military agencies.

The FAR Farce

The possibility of American military intervention in Laos evinced a well founded Pentagon conviction that the Royal Lao Army (FAR) was incapable of defending the kingdom. Recent intelligence reports showed that Pathet Lao soldiers, joined by North Vietnamese "advisors," were easily achieving daily territorial gains against the Royal Lao government.²¹ The U.S. military believed, however, that with improved training the FAR could be prepared to fight limited engagements. Thus, while the White House ordered U.S. troops readied for possible deployment into Laos, the PEO increased its efforts at strengthening Phoumi's army.

Building a combat effective Lao army was a difficult task. Leadership and morale within the FAR was extremely poor; it was not unusual for the Lao General Staff to send units into the field without proper training or equipment. The Franco-American military training program, an uneasy arrangement at best, had ceased to exist in February 1961 when the French withdrew from the plan.²²

Continued rebel successes and the loss of the French instructors prompted the PEO to request nine more Special Forces Field Training Teams and an additional 121 ECCOIL

technicians. By March 1961 the PEO had posted American advisors to many of the FAR combat units and was conducting much needed rear area training.²³ Nevertheless, the FAR battalions remained in a highly precarious state.

Instances were reported of the collapse of [FAR] units that had no US advisors with them or whose advisors did not stay with the CO [commanding officer] through the engagement. In cases where it was reported that the advisors withdrew, they were immediately followed by the officers of the unit, after which the unit itself panicked.²⁴

As a result, in mid-April 1961, CINCPAC recommended to the Joint Chiefs of Staff that American advisors be authorized to "participate in combat operations ... should the situation so require." Previous guidance on this subject seems to have been intentionally ambiguous, but most advisors understood the importance of avoiding situations where "capture seemed imminent." While the response of the JCS is not known, from this point forward "US advisors appear to have increasingly stayed with [FAR] units during combat operations."²⁵

The apparent policy change acknowledged a U.S. willingness to accept the risks of American soldiers in Laos being captured, injured, or even killed. Unfortunately, and perhaps inevitably, the decision quickly cost American lives.

The Loss of Team Moon

On 9 March 1961 communist soldiers captured a vital road junction between Luang Prabang and Vientiane. FAR units, ordered to counterattack the enemy, responded in panic by "throwing away their guns and fleeing for safety to the

surrounding mountains."²⁶ In the wake of the debacle U.S. Special Forces FTT 59, "Team Moon," was assigned to rebuild and advise the dispirited forces.

The Royal troops were returned to the offensive and heavy fighting continued along Route 13 for more than a month. On 22 April, following a "heavy and accurate artillery barrage," Pathet Lao soldiers overran Team Moon's position. Sergeants Bischoff and Biber were killed by grenade and machine gun fire. Captain Moon and Sergeant Ballenger were captured. Moon, after two escape attempts, was executed by his guards.²⁷

It was painfully obvious that the FAR, after some \$350 million in U.S. assistance and bolstered by American advisors, was still no match for the Vietnamese assisted Pathet Lao-Neutralist forces.²⁸

From PEO to MAAG

Captain Moon and his men did not die as "civilian" advisors. On 19 April 1961, President Kennedy authorized the Program Evaluations Office to openly operate as a uniformed Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG).

As long as the US was "officially" abiding by the 1954 Geneva Agreements and the French were in the military training picture, it was useful for the US to staff the PEO on a semicovert basis. Since in 1961 these conditions no longer prevailed there was no reason to continue what had been in effect an open secret.²⁹

Still, it was no coincidence that the order came on the heels of the failed Cuban refugee invasion of Cuba. "Fearing that the communists in Asia might interpret his decision [to abort

the operation] as irresolution" Kennedy authorized an immediate change to a MAAG.³⁰

Brigadier General Andrew J. Boyle, U.S. Army, who had succeeded General Heintges in January 1961, became the Chief of MAAG, Laos. The U.S. Army Special Forces units in Laos also received a name change. Previously, the teams had been known by a variety of code-names (Foretel, Monkhood, Molecular, Footsore) or simply by the name of the team leader. From this point forward the soldiers were designated "White Star Mobile Training Teams (WSMTTs).

The "White Star" advisors, about 150 men divided into twelve different teams, were assigned to all levels of the Laotian military. Their duties "ranged from individual weapon instruction to basic and advanced unit training ... supervision of artillery training, construction projects, [and] assistance in communication and logistics."³¹ "White Star" teams were also engaged in training "irregular forces to carry out guerilla and antiguerilla operations."³²

"Rose Bowl" and U.S. Intelligence Collection

As the Lao military and political situation continued to whirl in confusion, the White House ordered U.S. intelligence collection in Laos increased. The decision-makers were particularly concerned over the paucity of information on the communist build-up on the Plain of Jars.³³ But the 1954 Geneva agreements prohibited the U.S. from sending to Laos its most capable intelligence collection aircraft. As discussed

earlier, airborne intelligence gathering in Laos was initially conducted by a single VC-47 airplane assigned to the USAF Air Attache to Laos.

The Air Force improved the situation in early January 1961 by dispatching to Laos a specially configured SC-47 reconnaissance aircraft, dubbed "Rose Bowl." The new plane had a larger crew, a substantially increased fuel capacity, radio direction finding equipment, and a K-17 camera.³⁴

During January and February "Rose Bowl" flew almost every day taking "miles of photography." Concurrently, the airmen were "scanning radio bands" in an attempt to pinpoint the location of a communist radio beacon. For some time the crew had been frustrated by the ability of the Soviets to land their IL-14s at Xieng Khouang in bad weather. "We'd go up there in the worst kind of damn weather watch them and they'd make a circle and start an approach and go down. We knew of course that it was a radio ... we [just] couldn't pick it up."³⁵

On 23 March 1961, the "Rose Bowl" crew was scheduled to fly to Saigon for rest and relaxation. Instead of proceeding directly to Saigon the aircraft commander decided to make a reconnaissance run over the Plain of Jars. The SC-47, according to two different sources, violated standing orders and overflew Xieng Khouang airfield at an altitude of 3,500 feet. The airplane was hit by gunfire, caught fire, and immediately crashed to the ground. Major Lawrence R. Bailey,

Jr., a U.S. Army attache catching a ride to Saigon, was the only survivor. Bailey was captured by the Pathet Lao and imprisoned in Sam Neua for seventeen months.³⁶

The SC-47 shoot-down prompted the Pentagon to deploy the more advanced and less vulnerable RT-33 jet reconnaissance aircraft to mainland Southeast Asia. The U.S. concealed the effort by painting Lao markings on a borrowed Philippine Air Force RT-33. RT-33 surveillance missions, called "Field Goal," began from Udorn, Thailand on 24 April 1961. Three weeks later, in an effort to strengthen regional air defenses, the U.S. moved six F-100 fighter aircraft from the Philippines to Bangkok, Thailand.³⁷

Public Posturing

As Major Bailey was being interrogated by his communist captors, President Kennedy began an unprecedented television address and press conference on Laos.³⁸ The White House shrewdly scheduled the talk for the American dinner hour and arranged for the president's remarks to be broadcast live world-wide over the Voice of America. It was a strong message calculated to "convey to the Communists his mounting concern and resolution."³⁹

Implicitly reciting the lessons of Munich, he highlighted the growing seriousness of the Lao crisis and expressed his hope for a settlement.

My fellow Americans, Laos is far away from America, but the world is small The security of all Southeast Asia will be endangered if Laos loses its

neutral independence. Its safety runs with the safety of us all. I want to make it clear to the American people, and to all the world, that all we want in Laos is peace, not war - a truly neutral government, not a cold war pawn - a settlement concluded at the conference table, not on the battlefield.⁴⁰

Having initiated military measures to emphasize his determination to prevent a Communist takeover in Laos, the president publicly announced a moderate course.

Asia scholar Usha Mahajani, nevertheless, has expressed the view that Kennedy's press conference was actually designed "to prepare the American people for U.S. military intervention in Laos." According to Mahajani, "The invasion of Cuba, planned for April, was expected to be a resounding success.... Kennedy envisaged a similar triumphant operation in Laos."⁴¹

Operation "Millpond"

Dr. Mahajani was referring to intervention by Task Force 116, and these forces were certainly positioned for action in Laos. Recent evidence, however, reveals that Kennedy also had ordered the CIA to undertake "deniable" bombing operations against communist positions on the Plain of Jars. Flown as part of the "Millpond" program, the attacks were planned to coincide with what became the ill-fated Cuban Bay of Pigs operation.⁴²

In March 1961 approximately a dozen unmarked U.S. B-26 bombers were flown by a mix of Air America pilots and reserve and "recently discharged" active duty U.S. Air Force pilots to Takhli, Thailand, located about 120 miles north of

Bangkok.⁴³ Fear of a security leak kept the B-26's grounded most of the time and the pilots confined to the airfield, which they dubbed "The Ranch." For more than a month the men reviewed flying tactics, studied target folders, and occasionally flew C-46 cargo planes on ammunition resupply missions into Laos.⁴⁴

"Millpond" was supervised by U.S. Air Force Major Harry C. "Heinie" Aderholt. Major Aderholt was the commander of the 1095th Operational Evaluation Training Group, an Air Force organization which specialized in "cooperative efforts" with the CIA. At this same time Aderholt was also controlling covert C-46 airlift operations into Laos and coordinating the surveying and establishment of small landing strips known as "Lima Sites."⁴⁵ The "Lima Sites," scattered throughout Laos, would soon become essential to Air America's covert airborne resupply and troop movement efforts.

Finally, on the evening of 16 April 1961 the B-26 pilots were given commissions in the Royal Laotian Air Force, blood chits with some gold coins, and officially told they were about to attack the Plain of Jars. The next morning, just hours before the planned take off time, the strikes were abruptly cancelled. Major Aderholt told the men that events in Cuba had forced cancellation of their primary mission.⁴⁶

Failure in Cuba notwithstanding, the Takhli B-26's remained prepared for action. In Laos, early on 26 April 1961, General Boyle cabled CINCPAC and warned that the Lao

government forces were "on the ropes." According to one historian the general believed the Pathet Lao would be stopped by nothing "short of open U.S. or SEATO intervention backed by B-26's." Later in the day, Ambassador Brown cabled the State Department and requested "formal authority to authorize air strikes to deprive the enemy of key objectives."⁴⁷ Although the White House immediately convened a meeting to "coordinate U.S. moves," extant records do not mention what response, if any, was sent to Brown and Boyle.⁴⁸

For another three months the B-26's continued on alert at the "Ranch," occasionally flying reconnaissance missions over northeastern Laos. One of these missions, flown on or about 1 May, resulted in a near shoot-down. Two "former" U.S. Air Force pilots, Ronald L. Allaire and Claude W. Gilliam, having without incident photographed the town of Nape, quickly turned and began a second pass over the town center. A 37-mm anti-aircraft gun began firing and the B-26 was struck in the left horizontal stabilizer and elevator. The uninjured crew managed to avoid an international incident by returning the aircraft to Takhli.⁴⁹ By August the B-26's were flown to storage on Okinawa and the pilots returned to the "real" U.S. Air Force, Air America, and other flying jobs. This phase of "Millpond" was closed down.⁵⁰

While the public must await further details on the connection between the Bay of Pigs affair and the CIA's Thailand-based B-26 operations, there is no question that the

Cuban disaster caused President Kennedy to question the wisdom of direct U.S. military intervention in Laos.⁵¹ According to Kennedy confidant Theodore C. Sorenson:

That operation [Bay of Pigs] had been recommended principally by the same set of advisors who favored intervention in Laos. But now the President was far more skeptical of the experts, their reputations, their recommendations.... He relied more on his White House staff and his own common sense....⁵²

The president's decision to cancel the air strikes in Laos did not, however, affect his affinity for clandestine initiatives in the area. CIA paramilitary operations in Laos, with strong Thai support, were becoming an important component of U.S. military assistance to the Royal Lao government.

Thai Military Assistance to Laos

The Kong Le coup, as previously noted, created considerable anxiety within the Kingdom of Thailand. The Thais believed "any neutralist government in Laos would be fundamentally incapable of resisting communist pressures without the active military and economic support of the West."⁵³ Lao neutralism, as interpreted in Bangkok, meant an anti-Communist government. Prime Minister Sarit, therefore, was only too pleased to support General Phoumi's return to power.

But, as they had declared since 1955, the Thai government remained convinced that Communist encroachment in Laos would be halted only by SEATO intervention. A formal Thai request for direct military action was discussed during the 26-27

March 1961 SEATO Ministerial Conference. Although supported by U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, the appeal was shelved due to strong French and British opposition.⁵⁴ The rejection prevented a multilateral military reaction to Communist activity in Laos and made any overt military action by Thailand or the United States politically onerous. Deterred from a public course of action, Bangkok and Washington decided to expand their cooperation in covert military aid programs to Laos.

Small groups of Lao soldiers had been unofficially trained at Thai military bases since 1957. The U.S.-funded instruction occurred on a random basis and mostly involved Lao airborne companies and logistics specialists.⁵⁵ This was changed in April 1961 when, under Project EKARAD, the Royal Thai Army began accepting entire FAR battalions for military training in Thailand. In May the U.S. and Thailand agreed to expand the program to include basic training for officer candidates and recruits, specialized artillery training, and basic pilot training for the Royal Lao Air Force. By the end of the year the Thai military had graduated five Lao infantry battalions, two artillery batteries, one hundred officer candidates, 250 recruits, and more than a dozen pilots.⁵⁶

The Thai military also deployed advisors to Laos. During May and June Thai artillery experts assisted the U.S. Army in FAR fire direction training. Additionally, under a "Thai Volunteer Program," pilots, medical technicians, radio

operators and mechanics from the Thai armed forces and police were given discharges of convenience. The men were then issued Lao identity papers, hired by the U.S., and sent to Laos as civilian experts. From mid-1961 until March 1962 the "volunteer" operation maintained about sixty Thai specialists in Laos.⁵⁷ The Lao government was further aided by another long standing covert U.S.-Thai program.

Sea Supply

In 1951, at the direction of the U.S. National Security Council, the CIA and the Thai National Police began a joint project to build a paramilitary force which would "operate in small-unit patrols, parachute behind enemy lines, commit sabotage, and engage in espionage and surveillance."⁵⁸ The NSC intended the program to halt Chinese inspired insurgent activity along Thailand's long and mostly undefended borders.⁵⁹ Control of the project was assigned to the CIA's Bangkok cover organization, the "Overseas Southeast Asia Supply Company," or as it was more commonly known, Sea Supply.⁶⁰

Under the direction of James W. "Bill" Lair, Sea Supply established a camp at Lop Buri, eighty-five miles north of Bangkok, and began airborne training classes for selected members of the Thai police.⁶¹ The results were encouraging and, with Thai permission, the CIA extended the program to include members of the Royal Thai Army, Air Force, and Navy. Over the next two years more than four thousand men graduated from the Sea Supply school.⁶²

In 1953 the school was relocated to Hua Hin, ninety miles south of Bangkok and across the street from the King of Thailand's southern palace. For the next four years the CIA trained Thai "Royal Guard" battalions in airborne and counterinsurgency operations.⁶³ Beginning in 1958 the program's graduates were being formed into hundred-man Police Aerial Reinforcement Units (PARU) within the newly created Thai Border Patrol Police (BPP).⁶⁴ As a measure of their realistic training, the men completed the program by parachuting into insurgent contested areas. Taking advantage of Maoist dictums, the graduates were now prepared to work alongside their own people, with all the advantages of familiar terrain and community support. Highly trained and mobile, the PARU were arguably Thailand's most versatile fighting force.⁶⁵

When the Kong Le forces seized power in Laos, CIA and Thai officials assigned PARU specialists to General Phoumi's lead battalions. In November and December 1960 PARU communications and medical technicians, working with U.S. Army advisors, played an important role in Phoumi's capture of Vientiane.⁶⁶ It was not surprising, therefore, that CIA would call on the PARU for other Lao operations.

Claiming the Lao Highlands

A special contingent of CIA case officers, accompanied by PARU squads, were ordered into Laos in early 1961.⁶⁷ The first group included John E. "Jack" Shirley, Lloyd "Pat"

Landry, and Anthony "Tony" Poe. At the U.S. Embassy the CIA Station Chief, Gordon L. Jorgensen, explained their mission. The Lao government controlled little territory north of Vientiane. If and when settlement talks occurred, "proof" of Vientiane's country-wide political and military authority would be critically important. In order to demonstrate Royal government control Shirley, Landry, and Poe were told by Jorgensen immediately to begin the recruitment and military training of northern Laos' Hmong population. Using the Hmong, the CIA would insure that Vientiane could claim control of the highlands.⁶⁸

Hmong cooperation, however, was not easily gained. The Hmong were fighters, but they fought only in defense of their own land and lifestyle.⁶⁹ Disdained by most lowland Lao as "dirty, drug addicts," the mountaintop people viewed the Lao Lum with contempt. The Hmong felt no allegiance to a country controlled by lowlanders.⁷⁰ Therefore, as CIA agents and their PARU interpreters/assistants moved from village to village, the message to the tribesmen was simple, "The Vietnamese will soon come to take your land. We [U.S.] will give you the means to fight and defend your homes."⁷¹

The response was generally favorable. The Hmong enjoyed the new weapons and there was no CIA effort to move the tribesmen away from their homes. Within a few months, using a basic three day instruction cycle, several thousand men had received CIA training and weapons.⁷²

Searching for Turks

The CIA's enlistment of disparate hill tribes provided the Royal Lao government with an increased presence in northern Laos. Nevertheless, the agency believed that the effort was at best a passive delaying tactic. Washington did not initially envision the Hmong as an offensive force. Laos, experts agreed, would be controlled by the side with the most capable and determined armed forces. Despite considerable PEO/MAAG efforts the FAR had maintained a poor combat record and showed little evidence of impending meaningful improvement. Said one NSC staffer, "We discovered the Laotians were not Turks ... they would not stand up and fight."⁷³

But what about the Hmong? The CIA knew the Hmong could be aggressive warriors. Still, would they fight for anything more than their own mountaintops? Could the Hmong be trained in military tactics and the use of heavy weapons (e.g., machine guns, recoilless rifles, mortars) necessary to engage the well armed communist forces? Moreover, what about leadership? The FAR proved the folly of a well armed army led by inept and apathetic officers. Did the Hmong represent a source of manpower which could be used to bolster the Royal Lao Army? The CIA believed it had positive answers to all these questions.

The Emergence of Vang Pao

The Hmong of Xieng Khouang province were seriously

disrupted in December 1960 when the Pathet Lao-Kong Le forces seized the Plain of Jars. Life under a collective system was anathema to the Hmong. The Pathet Lao and Vietnamese often conscripted villagers for use as porters and guides and frequently seized Hmong opium crops.⁷⁴ There was also the distinct possibility that the high plain would become the scene of major fighting.

Lieutenant Colonel Vang Pao, a Hmong FAR officer native to Xieng Khouang, decided the Hmong should move from the plain to a more secure area.⁷⁵ The CIA, which had contact with Vang Pao through a PARU officer, agreed to back the plan.⁷⁶ Supported by Air America aircraft Vang Pao relocated some two hundred Hmong villages to seven pre-selected mountain sites ringing the Plain of Jars.⁷⁷ A military headquarters was established by Vang Pao at Phadong, located about six miles south of the plain, and the CIA, PARU, and "White Star" advisors set to work.⁷⁸

By May 1961 the CIA had equipped some five thousand Meo [Hmong] fighting men and had established a logistics pipeline entirely separate from that supporting other [Royal Lao] government forces. Vang Pao meanwhile cemented the loyalty of widespread Meo [Hmong] villages northeast of the plain, visiting them by light aircraft and arranging for air delivery of food and arms.⁷⁹

The CIA's "discovery" of an indigenous Lao fighting force was an encouraging development. Nevertheless, the Hmong could do little to solve the kingdom's real security problem. External Communist support fueled the Kong Le-Pathet Lao forces and until this association was severed the Royal Lao

government would remain in jeopardy.

Pursuing Diplomacy

In March and April 1961 President Kennedy signalled the Communist world his resolve to preserve the Boun Oum government, with U.S. military force if necessary. Kennedy recognized, however, that a peaceful resolution between the two superpowers would allow Washington and Moscow to move on to other more important foreign policy problems. Moreover, many in the White House believed that a skillful handling of the Lao crisis would enhance Kennedy's stature as a statesman. The president, therefore, took steps to assure the Soviets that he preferred a diplomatic solution.

On 26 and 27 March President Kennedy met, respectively, with British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan and Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko. During the meetings Kennedy repeated his determination to defend Laos while, at the same time, stressing his desire for a peaceful settlement.⁸⁰ The talks set off a flurry of worldwide diplomatic activity, and the Soviet Union and Great Britain, Co-Chairmen of the 1954 Geneva Conference, were successful in arranging the reactivation of the International Control Commission and the establishment of an 11 May truce date.⁸¹ While the diplomats worked behind the scenes to bring about a peaceful resolution to the Laotian dilemma, the Pathet Lao launched another offensive against Royal Lao positions.⁸² Two weeks before the cease-fire was to begin, President Kennedy

was again forced to contemplate increased U.S. military intervention in Laos.

In a 27 April meeting Walt W. Rostow, speaking for the Lao Task Force, advised the president to send a limited number of troops to Thailand. Ambassador W. Averell Harriman, who would head the U.S. delegation to Geneva, concurred and said the presence of U.S. troops in Thailand would strengthen the American negotiating position. The JCS agreed with deploying troops but believed a "show of force" had to be backed up with a strong offensive capability. The Chiefs did not want to begin the operation without the commitment of "120,000-140,000 men, with authority to use nuclear weapons if necessary."⁸³

Kennedy left the meeting greatly concerned over the military's belligerent "all the way" attitude and what seemed to him careless planning for various contingencies. The Bay of Pigs debacle was, no doubt, still fresh in his mind.⁸⁴ The president also knew there would be little SEATO support and virtually no Congressional backing for any large scale U.S. military action in Laos. Moreover, Kennedy was being told that South Vietnam, not Laos, was the preferable setting for a U.S. stand against Communist expansion in Southeast Asia.⁸⁵

Indeed, convincing evidence suggests that by this time Kennedy, if forced into a major confrontation with the Communists in Asia, had decided Vietnam would be the battleground. In a 5 August 1970 oral history interview

William H. Sullivan, recently returned from almost five years as Ambassador to Laos, described the Kennedy White House view:

The attitude was that Laos was a secondary problem; Laos was a poor place to get bogged down in because it was inland, had no access to the sea and no proper logistics lines ... that it was rather inchoate as a nation; that the Lao were not fighters, et cetera. While on the other hand if you were going to have a confrontation, the place to have it was in Vietnam because it did have logistical access to the sea and therefore, we had military advantages. It was an articulated, functioning nation. Its troops were tigers and real fighters. And, therefore, the advantages would be on our side to have a confrontation and showdown in Vietnam and not get sucked into this Laos operation.⁸⁶

Nonetheless, by 1 May 1961 Kennedy had decided to initiate U.S. military action in Laos. Fortuitously, just as the president was about to order a SEATO alert, the communists publicly agreed to a cease-fire. U.S. military action was cancelled and the cease-fire in Laos took effect on 11 May.

Five days later the following countries convened a second Geneva Conference: the P.R.C., Cambodia, France, Laos, the U.S.S.R., Britain, the U.S., South Vietnam, North Vietnam, India, Canada, Poland, Burma, and Thailand.⁸⁷ A 3-4 June meeting in Vienna between President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev seemed finally to defuse the issue between the two superpowers. In a joint statement the leaders said they had "reaffirmed their support of a neutral and independent Laos chosen by the Laotians themselves, and of international agreements for insuring that neutrality and independence."⁸⁸

A major Soviet-American military confrontation in Laos

had been averted and it was now up to the diplomats at Geneva to bring a settlement to the troubled Kingdom of Laos. But, as the peacemakers went to work in Geneva the combatants in Laos were finding it difficult to maintain the cease-fire.

The Hmong Factor

Not surprisingly, the first serious cease-fire violations in Laos occurred between the Kong Le-Pathet Lao troops on the Plain of Jars and Vang Pao's Hmong forces located at Phadong. Well before the cease-fire, CIA agents, PARU, and U.S. Army "White Star" advisors had arrived at Phadong to train and organize the Hmong soldiers.⁸⁹ The close proximity of the opposing forces -- a half dozen miles -- bred distrust and security concerns. Shortly after the cease-fire was initiated Pathet Lao gunners, with North Vietnamese support, began attacking Phadong with 75-mm artillery fire. The shelling continued until 6 June when the Hmong were driven out of the area.⁹⁰ In protest, Western delegations suspended the Geneva talks for five days.⁹¹

Vang Pao reassembled his forces southwest of Phadong at the village of Pha Khao and continued guerilla operations. Once again, CIA, PARU, and "White Star" advisors set to work training the Hmong army. The task was made easier when, on 29 August 1961, President Kennedy approved National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 80. The memo called for:

An immediate increase in mobile training teams in Laos to include advisors down to the company level, to a total U.S. strength of 500, together with an

attempt to get Thai agreement to supply an equal amount of Thai for the same purpose. An immediate increase of 2,000 in the number of Meos [Hmong] being supported to bring the total to a level of 11,000.⁹²

By October the president's decision had raised the number of U.S. Army Special Forces in Laos to three hundred men, with another 112 being prepared for deployment to the kingdom.⁹³

The U.S. would continue to train General Phoumi's lowland troops, but Vang Pao's Hmong army was becoming the most important indigenous fighting force in Laos. By the summer of 1962, the general and his U.S. advisors had founded a permanent military headquarters in the Long Tieng valley, located thirty-five miles southwest of the plain.⁹⁴ Known by the CIA and Air America as Lima Site 98 or Lima Site 20A, Long Tieng would soon become the focal point of America's secret war in Laos.

Project Mad River

The movement of CIA, PARU, and "White Star" advisors, as well as the supply of the Hmong soldiers and their families, was a major task and would have been impossible without the aerial services of Air America. Under contract to the U.S. International Cooperation Agency (ICA), the CIA proprietary had been flying H-19 and H-34 helicopters in Laos for some time. The initial ICA contract specified Air America was to "furnish approximately 35 personnel for the operation and maintenance of four H-19 aircraft." The arrival of four H-34 helicopters in December 1960 changed the contract terms and

Air America was held responsible for "furnishing between 85 and 140 personnel."⁹⁵ As discussed earlier, Air America received an additional sixteen H-34's in March 1961 and based them at Udorn, Thailand. Shortly thereafter, under Project Mad River, the U.S. Air Force contracted Air America to fly and maintain the H-34's.⁹⁶

On 19 May 1961 General Boyle, Chief of the U.S. MAAG in Laos, dispatched a classified message to the headquarters of the Air Material Force Pacific Area (AMFPA), the U.S. Air Force's Far East procurement agency. The message requested that AMFPA undertake secret contracting negotiations with Air America Inc., in Taipei, Taiwan.⁹⁷ According to AMFPA civilian contracting officer James Spencer, the general provided the following guidance, "I want airplanes to fly where I want them, when I want them, and with no interference. Now get me a contract that will give me what I want as soon as possible."⁹⁸

The contract requirements were unusual to say the least, but after a favorable legal review the Air Force decided that Air America could be provided a sole source contract. The contract justification read:

The Department of the Air Force proposes entering into a contract with Air America, Inc., on a sole source basis for the furnishing of services by the contractor to provide, establish, manage, operate, and maintain a complete flying and maintenance service, inclusive of all facilities, supplies, materials, equipment, and support services not furnished by the U.S. Government to permit utilization by the U.S. Government of helicopter aircraft at points in Southeast Asia as designated

by the Chief, MAAG, Laos, in support of the Royal Lao Government.

The justification went on to state that the contract was required for services "in the interest of National Defense, which because of military considerations, should not be publicly disclosed and for which Air America, Inc., is the only known source."⁹⁹ Procurement action started on 31 May and was completed by 7 June 1961. This initial Mad River contract, dated 1 July 1961, paid Air America slightly more than \$2.5 million for the first year of the H-34 operation.¹⁰⁰

Flying for Project Mad River was dangerous work. On 15 May 1961, an H-34 emergency landing enabled the Pathet Lao to capture a "temporary" Air America pilot, a "temporary" Air America flight mechanic, and an American television reporter. Two weeks later an H-34 crashed while moving supplies near Phadong, killing two "temporary" Air America pilots and seriously injuring a MAAG passenger.¹⁰¹

Deadlock

The fall of Phadong caused only a temporary delay in the Geneva negotiations and further serious cease-fire violations were discouraged by the June to October rainy season. Because Kennedy and Khrushchev settled the major issue of external intervention at Vienna, and the Americans, Soviets, and Chinese were agreed in their support of a neutral Laos, the delegates turned their attention toward procedural problems.¹⁰² Their work could not proceed, however, without the formation

of a recognized Lao government.

In late June and again in early October, Souvanna Phouma, Souphanouvong, and Boun Oum met to work out an agreement on a new coalition government. The princes could agree that Souvanna would head the new government, but the division of cabinet positions, particularly those of defense and interior, could not be settled. Souphanouvong suggested a compromise which would give the two ministries to Souvanna. But Boun Oum, fearing the close relationship between the two brothers, balked.¹⁰³

Meanwhile, the Geneva delegates were becoming impatient with the Laotians. The diplomats had finished drafting the necessary documents and all that remained to a final agreement was the seating of a new Lao government. In December Great Britain and the Soviet Union urged the three princes to find a solution. Boun Oum now refused even to hold meetings with Souvanna and Souphanouvong.

Washington, which at the urging of Ambassador Harriman now backed Souvanna as prime minister, began to apply diplomatic pressure on the Vientiane government.¹⁰⁴ When this friendly persuasion failed to work, the U.S. cut off economic aid to Boun Oum. Four days later the prime minister consented to new discussions; aid was resumed. Boun Oum and Phoumi, nevertheless, continued to reject Souvanna's control of the defense and interior portfolios. The talks deadlocked.¹⁰⁵ The situation in Laos then took another turn toward superpower

confrontation.

The Nam Tha Debacle

Despite warnings from his American advisors, in early 1962 General Phoumi began to mass troops in the northwestern Lao town of Nam Tha. According to one knowledgeable source, Phoumi sought to provoke an attack which would result in the communist capture of a key Lao city. The bizarre plan, Phoumi hoped, would result in U.S. military intervention on his behalf and America's rejection of Souvanna Phouma and the neutralists.¹⁰⁶

The general received his wish the first week of May 1962 when minor Pathet Lao movements at Nam Tha forced five thousand of Phoumi's best troops to "stream in panic across the Mekong into Thailand."¹⁰⁷ The New York Times reported that the Kennedy administration felt the Royal government had provoked the attack.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, the president felt obligated to demonstrate U.S. support in the face of what reporters described as a serious communist offensive.

On 15 May 1962, in an effort to gain some bipartisan leverage, Kennedy met with his White House predecessor. Eisenhower agreed to support a hard line position, and later the same day Kennedy announced the movement of about three thousand U.S. troops to Thailand.¹⁰⁹ Kennedy "wanted a political use of military forces, not the start of a regular military operation which might generate its own forward momentum, as in Korea."¹¹⁰ The "signal" seemed to have the

desired effect. On 25 May Premier Khrushchev announced that "Moscow continued to support the establishment of a neutral Laos, thereby convincing the United States that Russia was doing what she could to prevent the Pathet Lao ... [actions]."¹¹¹ Communist activity subsided, and U.S. forces deployed to Thailand advanced no further. Cooperation between Moscow and Washington had once again averted direct American military intervention in Laos.

Souvanna Prevails

The miserable performance of General Phoumi's army left the rightists in near political and military collapse. Boun Oum and Phoumi decided to salvage what they could in a new government. On 11 June 1962 Souvanna, Souphanouvong, and Boun Oum announced the formation of a coalition government. Souvanna was to become prime minister and minister of defense and Souphanouvong and Phoumi were named deputy premiers. Cabinet positions were divided as follows: neutralists, seven seats; right wing, four seats; Pathet Lao, four seats; and four seats uncommitted. Two weeks later the Souvanna government took office and a delegation was dispatched to Geneva.¹¹²

On 23 July 1962 the irrepressible Souvanna Phouma watched as the foreign ministers of fourteen nations signed a Declaration and Protocol on the Neutrality of Laos.¹¹³ It was a time for celebration and happiness, not unlike similar circumstances eight years previous. However, as with the

Geneva agreements of 1954, Laos would have a very difficult time remaining neutral and independent of outside influences. Despite another international accord Laos remained ensnared by the political and territorial ambitions of Communist neighbors, the security concerns of Thailand and the United States, and geographic fate.

ENDNOTES FOR CHAPTER III

1. Eisenhower, Waging Peace, 609-10.
2. Ibid., 612.
3. Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, 163. See also Gravel, Pentagon Papers, II:635-7. Eisenhower's actual comments, and how Kennedy and his advisors perceived this advice, are now under close historical scrutiny. U.S. diplomatic historians Richard H. Immerman and Fred I. Greenstein have recently located documentary evidence which indicates Eisenhower may not have recommended a unilateral U.S. response. Moreover, a number of people who attended the meeting have conflicting versions of what was said, and by whom. Richard H. Immerman and Fred I. Greenstein, "What Did Eisenhower Advise Kennedy About Indochina?," unpublished manuscript. (Manuscript in my possession). A week earlier Eisenhower had dispatched to the Boun Oum government ten T-6 trainers modified to carry machine guns and rockets. Goldstein, American Policy, 231.
4. Following his election victory Kennedy is reported to have privately said of Laos, "an American invasion, a Communist victory or whatever, I wish it would happen before we take over and get blamed for it." Theodore C. Sorenson, Kennedy (New York: Harper and Row, 1965) 640.
5. The tag, "action intellectuals," was coined by Theodore H. White. See William C. Gibbons, The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War. Executive and Legislative Roles and

Relationships. Part II: 1961-1964 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986) 7. (Hereafter cited as Gibbons, U.S. and the Vietnam War, Part II).

6. Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, 329.

7. Walt W. Rostow, The Diffusion of Power: An Essay in Recent History (New York: Macmillan, 1972) 266.

8. Gravel, Pentagon Papers, II:33.

9. Herbert S. Parmet, JFK: The Presidency of John F. Kennedy (New York: Dial, 1983), 133.

10. Goldstein, American Policy, 229.

11. Dommen, Conflict, 182-3, and 186.

12. Goldstein, American Policy, 233, and Dommen, Conflict, 186-7.

13. Memorandum to the President, from Walt W. Rostow, 28 February 1961. (Document in my possession).

14. Gibbons, U.S. and the Vietnam War, Part II, 18-9, Hilsman, To Move a Nation, 128, and Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, 332.

15. Memorandum to the President, from Walt W. Rostow, 10 March 1961. (Document in my possession).

16. Marolda and Fitzgerald, U.S. Navy, 60-2. Professor William C. Gibbons, in his very valuable study on the Vietnam war, attributes these decisions to White House meetings of 20 and 21 March. Gibbons, U.S. and the Vietnam War, Part II, 21. Arthur Schlesinger says "Neither the meeting on March 20 nor

another session the next day reached a decision."

Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, 333.

17. Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, 333.

18. Marolda and Fitzgerald, U.S. Navy, 60.

19. Ibid., 60-1. See also Tilford, Search and Rescue, 34.

Udon, like many other Thai airfields which would eventually host hundreds of American military aircraft, was officially a Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB). The notable exception was the B-52 base at Utapao, which came under the control of the Royal Thai Navy.

20. Air America Log, Vol. VI No. 5, Kadena, Okinawa, 1972, my interview (by telephone) with Clarence J. Abadie, Jr., Houston, Texas, 26 August 1987, and John Fonburg, letter to the author, 26 February 1989. Abadie and Fonburg were two of the pilots who flew the helicopters to Udon.

21. The "advisors" were, in fact, providing more than just leadership. A captured Vietnamese soldier, formerly assigned to the PAVN's 925th Independent Regiment, revealed that he "belonged to one of the two 42-man sections of mortar and machine gun specialists who had been ordered into Laos on February 19." Dommen, Conflict, 187-8.

22. Wing, Case Study, B41.

23. Ibid., B16.

24. Ibid., B18.

25. Ibid., B18-B19.

26. Dommen, Conflict, 187.

27. In the "spirit" of the 1962 Geneva agreements the Communists released Sergeant Ballenger on 15 August 1962. Shelby L. Stanton, Green Berets at War (New York: Dell, 1985) 39-40. See also Wing, Case Study, 32.
28. Hilsman, To Move a Nation, 127-9, and Wing, Case Study, E6.
29. Wing, Case Study, A31. See also Hilsman, To Move a Nation, 134. For an amusing account of how the PEO-turned-MAAG personnel scrambled to find uniforms in order to comply with the president's orders see Department of the Army, Senior Officers Debriefing Program, Lieutenant General Andrew J. Boyle (March 1971; Reprinted by Dalley Book Service, Christiansburg, Virginia, 1988) 23-4.
30. Goldstein, American Policy, 239.
31. Wing, Case Study, C27.
32. Ibid., C29.
33. Rostow Memorandum to the President, 28 February 1961.
34. Toland, "AF Oral History," 24, and my 30 November 1990 interview with Toland.
35. Department of the Air Force. Oral History Interview. Colonel William Von Platen, USAF. (Maxwell AFB, Alabama: 10 May 1975) 53. At the time of the event Von Platen was a U.S. Air Force major serving as an Assistant Air Attache to Laos.
36. Toland, "AF Oral History," 35-8, my 30 November 1990 interview with Toland, and Von Platen, "AF Oral History," 53-4. See also Tilford, Search and Rescue, 33.

37. Tilford, Search and Rescue, 34-5, and Robert F. Futrell, The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia. The Advisory Years to 1965 (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, U.S. Air Force, 1981) 74.

38. Due to the time difference between Washington and Saigon it is unlikely the president knew of the SC-47 loss. When the aircraft did not arrive in Saigon by late afternoon Colonel Toland cabled Vientiane for confirmation of the crew's departure. Toland received verification the following morning and initiated a search. Toland, "AF Oral History," 35.

39. David K. Hall, "The Laos Crisis, 1960-61," in The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy, Alexander L. George, David K. Hall, and William E. Simons (Boston: Little, 1971) 59.

40. Goldstein, American Policy, 236.

41. Usha Mahajani, "President Kennedy and United States Policy in Laos, 1961-63," Journal of Southeast Asian Studies 2 (September 1971): 91.

42. My interview with Thomas G. Jenny, former Air America pilot and a "Millpond" participant, Honolulu, Hawaii, 26 January 1990.

43. Ibid. The active duty pilots reentered the Air Force following termination of the project. William M. Leary, letter to the author, 23 November 1990.

44. Ibid. Another account indicates that some of the B-26's flew reconnaissance missions over eastern Laos from October

to December 1961. William M. Leary, letter to the author, 6 February 1990.

45. My interview with Brigadier General Harry C. Aderholt, U.S. Air Force, retired, Ft. Walton Beach, Florida, 2 May 1988, and Leary letter, 23 November 1990. General Aderholt told me that his practical title from 1960-62 was "Senior CIA Air Operations Officer." See also Bowers, USAF Tactical Airlift, 441.

46. Leary letter, 23 November 1990, and my interview with Jenny, 26 January 1990. The "blood chits" were silk cloths printed with messages in a variety of languages promising rewards to anyone who assisted downed American pilots.

47. Parmet, JFK, 148.

48. Marolda and Fitzgerald, U.S. Navy, 66. Admiral Felt recalled in a 1974 oral history interview that in 1961 the U.S. Ambassador to Laos had requested B-26's. There is no specific date associated with this recollection, only the statement that the plea "was never granted." "Reminiscences of Admiral Harry Donald Felt," 512. Admiral Felt has been unable to recall any details regarding the B-26 request. My interview with Felt, 1 March 1990.

49. Leary letter, 23 November 1990.

50. Ibid., and my interview with Jenny, 26 January 1990. Some aspects of "Millpond" remain classified by the U.S. government.

51. A detailed review of the Bay of Pigs invasion is found in Operation Zapata: The "Ultrasensitive" Report and Testimony of the Board of Inquiry on the Bay of Pigs. Frederick, Maryland: University Publications of America, 1981.

52. Sorenson, Kennedy, 644.

53. Randolph, The U.S. and Thailand, 36.

54. Ibid., 40.

55. Wing, Case Study, B42.

56. Ibid., B44.

57. Ibid., B47-B48.

58. Thomas Lobe, United States National Security and Aid to the Thailand Police Monograph Series in World Affairs, Vol 14, Book 2. (Denver: University of Denver Graduate School of International Studies, 1977) 23.

59. My interview with General Saiyud Kerdphol, Royal Thai Army, retired, Bangkok, Thailand, 14 August 1990. General Saiyud is a former Supreme Commander of the Thai Armed Forces and an acknowledged international expert on counterinsurgency operations. He was closely associated with the Hua Hin and Lop Buri training programs.

60. My interview with John E. Shirley, Bangkok, Thailand, 1 August 1990. Shirley was a CIA field agent operating undercover as an advisor to the Royal Thai Navy. He worked with the Thai counterinsurgency program for many years. In early 1951 Civil Air Transport began charter work for Sea Supply. Leary, Perilous Missions, 129, and 199.

61. My interview with James W. Lair, Bangkok, Thailand, 10 August 1990. Lair, a CIA agent, joined the Thai police as a captain and eventually rose to become a colonel. Professor Lobe says "to train and equip the new police units ... the CIA gave \$35 million to Sea Supply." Lobe, Aid to the Thai Police, 23. Lair reports his weapons and ammunition came from CIA acquired World War II stockpiles and his yearly budget never exceeded \$80,000 a year. My interview with Lair, 10 August 1990. I believe Lair's account to be accurate.

62. Lobe, Aid to the Thai Police, 24, and my interview with Shirley, 1 August 1990. From 1952-58 Shirley was Lair's deputy at Lop Buri.

63. My interview with Shirley, 1 August 1990. The original Sea Supply training camp remains standing and symbolically "guards" the King's residence. Second Lieutenant Suriyoun Juntramanid, Thai Border Patrol Police, Hua Hin, Thailand, kindly allowed me to tour and photograph the Hua Hin compound on 28 July 1990.

64. The acronym PARU is also sometimes written as Police Aerial Reconnaissance Unit or Police Aerial Resupply Unit.

65. My interview with Second Lieutenant Suriyoun Juntramanid, Thai Border Patrol Police, Hua Hin, Thailand, 28 July 1990, and my interview with Kerdphol, 14 August 1990. See also Saiyud Kerdphol, The Struggle for Thailand. Counter-insurgency 1965-1985 (Bangkok: S. Research Center Co., Ltd., 1986) 74-82.

66. My interview with James W. Lair, Bangkok, Thailand, 14 August 1990. See also Lobe, Aid to the Thai Police, 34-7.

67. The CIA had previously organized an unconventional warfare program among some Laotian tribal groups. Wing, Case Study, B21.

68. My interviews with John E. Shirley, James W. Lair, and Lloyd Landry, Bangkok, Thailand, 17 August 1990. Over "the best Chinese fried noodles in Bangkok," the three men recounted to me the establishment of CIA paramilitary operations in Laos. Tony Poe, born Anthony Posepny, is still alive and living in Udorn, Thailand. Friends of Poe, however, advised me that he suffers from memory problems and would not be a useful source.

69. The Hmong had an uneasy and sometimes violent relationship with the French colonial administration. See Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 10-1 and Lee, "Minority Policies and the Hmong," 200.

70. Scott, "Migrants Without Mountains," 141-2. These same sentiments have been expressed to me, often in very heated language, by scores of Hmong and lowland Lao.

71. My interviews with Shirley, Lair, and Landry, 17 August 1990.

72. Ibid. The CIA teams were being transported around Laos in Air America helicopters and Short Take-Off and Landing (STOL) U-10 Helio-Couriers. Among the pilots was Dien Bien Phu veteran Fred F. Walker. Ibid.

73. Gibbons, U.S. and the Vietnam War, Part II, 24.
74. Opium was easily traded to Chinese merchants for guns and ammunition. Wekkin, "The Rewards of Revolution," 186.
75. Born in 1928, Vang Pao joined the French army as an enlisted man, served with distinction, and was the first Hmong commissioned into the Royal Lao Army. For a detailed review of Vang Pao's early life see Timothy N. Castle, "Alliance in a Secret War: The United States and the Hmong of Northeastern Laos," M.A. thesis., (San Diego State University, 1979) 53-5. Vang Pao had a widespread reputation as a charismatic leader who was dedicated to his people and ruthless with his enemies. My interview with Major Don T. Cherry, U.S. Air Force, retired, San Diego, California, 16 March 1979. Cherry was an intelligence officer who served as a Vang Pao advisor from 1965-66 and 1972-3. Vang Pao was also a close associate of Touby Lyfoung, the paramount Hmong leader of northeastern Laos and a member of the Boun Oum cabinet. Lee, "Minority Policies and the Hmong," 202. See also Keith Quincy, Hmong: History of a People (Cheney, Washington: Eastern Washington University Press, 1988), 170-2.
76. My interview with Shirley, 14 August 1990.
77. D. Gareth Porter, "After Geneva: Subverting Laotian Neutrality," in Laos: War and Revolution, ed. Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) 183-4.
78. According to the Pentagon Papers, in early 1961 there were

ninety-nine CIA-controlled PARU advisors assigned to Hmong units. Gravel, Pentagon Papers, II:646.

79. Bowers, USAF Tactical Airlift, 442.

80. Goldstein, American Policy, 238-9, and Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 147.

81. Goldstein, American Policy, 241.

82. It was during this time that Team Moon was lost.

83. Gibbons, U.S. and the Vietnam War, Part II, 26.

84. Ibid., 25-6.

85. Ibid., 26-9.

86. Kennedy Library, Oral History Interview with William H. Sullivan (second of two), 5 August 1970, p. 33, as cited in *ibid.*, 24. Walt W. Rostow has recorded that Kennedy told him much the same thing about the advantages of fighting in Vietnam instead of Laos. See W. W. Rostow, "JFK and Southeast Asia," paper presented at Conference on the Presidency of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Los Angeles, 14 November 1980, 26.

87. Goldstein, American Policy, 247.

88. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 154.

89. My interview with Shirley, 1 August 1990. Shirley was assigned to Phadong during this time.

90. Dommen, Conflict, 207. Hugh Toye states that the gunners were members of Kong Le's army, trained by the Vietnamese. Toye, Buffer State or Battlefield, 177-8. See also Thee, Notes of a Witness, 113-5. CIA agent Shirley recalls that the enemy used seventeen 75-mm guns during the attack on Phadong.

Shirley, the "White Star" team, and the PARU accompanied the Hmong in their retreat to a safer location. My interview with Shirley, 1 August 1990.

91. George Modelski, International Conference on the Settlement of the Laotian Question 1961-2. (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1962) 65.

92. DOD, U.S. Vietnam Relations Book 11, 247-9.

93. Stanton, Green Berets, 41.

94. The fighting at Phadong and the subsequent moves to Pha Khao and Long Tieng became the subject of a technically superior, hour length, CIA produced film called "Journey from Phadong." Originally, the movie was made to "sell" the Hmong assistance program to selected members of the U.S. Congress. Later, the film was dubbed in the Hmong language and shown in Laos. My interview with James W. Lair, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 15 April 1988. "Journey from Phadong" was held in the CIA archives until a U.S. Air Force intelligence officer, who had formerly been assigned to Laos and requests anonymity, was given permission to copy the film. In 1987 a copy of the film was donated to the University of Minnesota refugee studies program. Through the efforts of Vang Yang, English and White Hmong language transcripts of the movie are available from the refugee studies program.

95. The ICA contract number was 39-007. U.S. Air Force contracting records, 7 June 1961. (Contracts in my possession).

96. During this period Air America was also flying fixed wing aircraft in Laos. According to Dr. William M. Leary, "Air America's first permanent assignment in Laos began in July 1957 with a C-47 in Vientiane used by U.S. Embassy and CIA personnel." William M. Leary, letter to the author, 22 January 1991.

97. U.S. Air Force contracting document, dated 24 May 1961. (Document in my possession). Most of the Air America contracts for flying operations in Laos were negotiated and managed by U.S. Air Force contracting officers assigned to Japan and Thailand. Following termination of the program the Air Force records were stored at Hickam AFB, Hawaii from 1973-83, and then moved to permanent storage at the USAF Historical Research Center at Maxwell AFB, Alabama. Measuring some eighteen cubic feet, the materials remained sealed until reviewed by me in May 1989. Martin L. Kaufman, as a captain, served for nearly six years as one of the principal U.S. Air Force contracting officers assigned to oversee the Air America program and was the driving force behind the preservation of these invaluable records.

98. Department of the Air Force, Major Edouard R.L. Doty, USAF and Capt Rodney C. Widner, USAF, "Logistics Support for the Royal Lao Air Force as Conducted by a MAAG in Exile." (M.A. thesis, Air Force Institute of Technology, Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, 1974) 95. I am indebted to Colonel Martin L.

Kaufman, U.S. Air Force, for providing me with this document.
(Document in my possession).

99. U.S. Air Force contracting document, 30 June 1961.
(Contract in my possession).

100. The contract period was 1 July 1961 through 30 June 1962.
U.S. Air Force contracting document, 1 July 1961. (Contract
in my possession).

101. Air America accident investigation reports. (Documents
in my possession). The ICA and USAF contracts required Air
America to investigate and report to the U.S. Air Force all
aircraft accidents. The "temporary" Air America designation
indicates that the men were actually active duty military
personnel. About half of the original H-34 pilots and flight
mechanics were active duty members of the U.S. Navy, U.S.
Marine Corps, or U.S. Army. Referred to as "sheep-dipped,"
most of these men served out their military time with Air
America and then remained with the company upon discharge.
Fonburg letter, 26 February 1989. Grant Wolfkill was the
reporter.

102. Toye, Buffer State or Battlefield, 174.

103. Goldstein, American Policy, 252-3.

104. Harriman's opinion of Souvanna was formed during personal
talks between the two men and recommendations from French
diplomats. Interview by Arthur M. Schlesinger, 17 January
1965, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program, p. 56.

105. Goldstein, American Policy, 255.

106. Toye, Buffer State or Battlefield, 182-3. Toye, a British military attache in Laos, personally observed Phoumi on numerous occasions.

107. Goldstein, American Policy, 256. Regarding the performance of Phoumi's army, an account by an American advisor (perhaps apocryphal), stated, "... the morale of my battalion is substantially better than our last engagement. The last time they dropped their weapons and ran. This time they took their weapons with them." Gravel, Pentagon Papers, V:264.

108. New York Times, 7 May 1962.

109. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 176-7, Gibbons, U.S. and the Vietnam War, Part II, 115-6, and Toye, Buffer State or Battlefield, 184. For some interesting views on the decision making during this crisis see Stephen E. Pelz, "When Do I Have Time to Think? John F. Kennedy, Roger Hilsman, and the Laotian Crisis of 1962." Diplomatic History 2 (1979): 215-29. Roger Hilsman and Stephen E. Pelz. "When is a Document Not a Document - And Other Thoughts." Diplomatic History 3 (1979): 345-8.

110. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 177.

111. Goldstein, American Policy, 262.

112. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 177, and Goldstein, American Policy, 263.

113. Dommen, Conflict, 213.

CHAPTER IV

THE GENEVA FACADE: SEE, HEAR, AND SPEAK NO EVIL

The 1962 Geneva agreements satisfied President Kennedy. He had avoided a major U.S.-Soviet confrontation and was free to pursue with Premier Khrushchev more important matters. And, as the U.S. focus in Southeast Asia shifted to Vietnam, Laos was quickly and largely forgotten by the American public.

The conflict there, however, was far from resolved. As the United States prepared to withdraw American military personnel from Laos in accordance with the Geneva agreements, it became clear there would be no similar North Vietnamese compliance. Kennedy, at the strong urging of Averell Harriman, nevertheless, decided to carry out the departure. The president did not challenge the communist violations with direct military action, deciding instead on a policy of covert U.S. military support to the Royal Lao government. Ten years later presidential advisor Walt Rostow observed, "I would judge Kennedy's failure to move promptly and decisively to deal with the violation of the Laos Accords the greatest single error in American policy of the 1960's."¹

The Pushkin-Harriman Understanding

On 23 July 1962, fourteen nations pledged their cooperation and assistance in "build[ing] a peaceful, neutral, independent, democratic, unified and prosperous Laos."²

Soviet-American unanimity was, however, considered the linchpin of any successful agreement on Laos. Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Georgi Pushkin had repeatedly provided personal assurances to U.S. representative W. Averell Harriman that Moscow fully endorsed Washington's desire for a neutral and independent Laos. The Pushkin-Harriman understanding, according to a knowledgeable former U.S. State Department official, included the following points:

The USSR would be responsible for compliance by the Communist side, including North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao. The UK and US would be responsible for the non-Communist side The USSR would ensure that Hanoi would observe Lao neutrality to include preventing North Vietnamese use of Laos as a corridor to South Vietnam.³

U.S. - Soviet cooperation was underscored when, following the signing of the Geneva agreements, Ambassador Harriman summoned Leonard Unger, U.S. Ambassador designate to Laos, to Geneva for a face to face meeting with Sergei Afanasseyev, the new Soviet Ambassador to Laos. Ambassador Unger recalls that Harriman and Pushkin told the two Vientiane-bound diplomats to "work together and make it [Geneva agreements] work."⁴

Harriman's Decision

There was no doubt in Unger's mind that Harriman believed he had a firm commitment from Pushkin, and this confidence in the Soviet position was communicated by Ambassador Harriman to President Kennedy.⁵ Still, as the 7 October 1962 deadline approached for the departure from Laos of all foreign regular and irregular troops,⁶ there was no indication that the North

Vietnamese were leaving Laos in any great numbers.⁷

The continued communist presence created some sentiment within the Kennedy administration to delay U.S. compliance with the agreements until the Vietnamese removed their forces from eastern Laos. Averell Harriman, who was now Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, would have none of it. Together with Roger Hilsman, Harriman advised the president to comply fully with the Geneva agreements. Writes Hilsman:

We felt ... that the Communists continued to pursue their goal of gaining control of all of Laos, but that for the time being, at least, they intended to do so primarily through political means and generally within the terms of the Geneva agreements. The North Vietnamese would undoubtedly insist on maintaining some military presence in Laos, both to backstop the Pathet Lao position and to maintain their hold on the infiltration routes into South Vietnam. But our judgment was that the Communists would make an effort to keep this military presence small and inconspicuous and would use the infiltration routes circumspectly. Harriman, especially, felt strongly that the United States should comply with both the letter and the spirit of the agreements in every detail. If the Geneva agreements and the political situation in Laos failed, he wanted it to be the Communist side that had to pay the political cost. If the Communists broke the agreements and the United States had to intervene with force, he wanted to make sure we had all the international political support we could get.

President Kennedy, hearing no serious opposition to these judgments, decided to complete the U.S. military departure from Laos.⁸

Withdrawing from Laos

The United States, which since the May 1961 cease-fire

had steadily increased the size of its MAAG in Laos, was required to withdraw slightly more than twelve hundred U.S. and third country personnel. About one hundred of these men were Thai "volunteers," 424 were contract technicians of the Eastern Construction Company in Laos (ECCOIL), and the rest members of the U.S. armed forces.

The Pentagon, in order to make the most effective use of the remaining training time with the Royal Lao Army and Hmong irregular forces, ordered a phased departure of the MAAG personnel. Thai specialists remained in Laos until 22 August, a month later the U.S. completed an evacuation of the ECCOIL employees, and in mid-September a few American military personnel began to depart the country. According to Admiral Felt, CINCPAC, Washington ordered the U.S. MAAG to maintain a sizable contingent in Laos up until the deadline and "go out with flags flying high."⁹ On 6 October Major General Reuben H. Tucker, III, Chief, MAAG Laos, and 127 MAAG personnel formally departed the Kingdom of Laos.¹⁰

North Vietnamese compliance with the accords, as expected by the CIA, was patently spurious. On 7 October the official North Vietnamese news agency reported that "The Vietnamese military personnel which were previously sent to Laos at the request of the Royal Lao Government have all been withdrawn from Laos."¹¹ According to William Colby, then chief of CIA clandestine operations in the Far East:

there had been some 7,000 North Vietnamese troops in Laos at the time of the Accord. But during the

so-called count-out [conducted by the International Control Commission] only forty went through the formalities of leaving the country. Since they had never been acknowledged as being there, they could hardly in theory be officially counted out, but our intelligence showed that they were there nonetheless.¹²

The Pathet Lao, whose fighting men were estimated to number some sixteen thousand at the beginning of the cease-fire, had now increased their armed forces to about 19,500.¹³ As the Royal Lao government supposedly inaugurated a new era of guaranteed peace and neutrality, there was little real prospect for either.

A Wary Beginning

In July 1962 Leonard Unger took charge of one of the most demanding U.S. diplomatic posts in the world. He was particularly well qualified for the position, having arrived in Vientiane from a four-year stint as Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok. Ambassador Unger held the people of Southeast Asia in high regard, spoke Thai, and counted many influential Thai leaders as personal friends.¹⁴ Unger's keen awareness of Thai politics did not mix well with his "marching orders" from Averell Harriman.

Bangkok was extremely skeptical of the Souvanna Phouma coalition government's ability to withstand Communist domination. The Thai, as always, were deeply concerned over the security of their extensive borders and the degree to which China and North Vietnam might exploit a weak Laos to infiltrate and overwhelm Thailand. Earlier in the year Thai

Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman had received what he considered to be a firm U.S. commitment to defend Thailand against Communist attack, with or without SEATO approval. Issued on 6 March 1962, and popularly known as the Rusk-Thanat Communique, U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk affirmed "that the United States regards the preservation of the independence and integrity of Thailand as vital to the national interest of the United States and to world peace."¹⁵ The pledge, backed by America's May 1962 deployment of troops to Thailand, convinced Bangkok the U.S. was determined to fight Communist advances in Laos.

Now, as the United States appeared willing to accept a formidable North Vietnamese presence in Laos, Thai government officials expressed doubts about America's long term role in Southeast Asia. During a conversation with Ambassador Unger, Foreign Minister Thanat expressed "no enthusiasm for the Harriman plan in Laos and said neutralization would not work." But, Harriman "had the president's ear," and Unger had no choice but to hope for the best and implement Harriman's policy.¹⁶

However, as the deadline approached for the withdrawal of all foreign troops, Harriman could no longer ignore the Communist violations. William Colby recounts that he personally provided Secretary Harriman a weekly briefing on CIA operations in the Far East. Since July Harriman had made it very clear to Colby that he expected the CIA to comply

fully with the agreements.

He insisted on knowing in detail our activities there, and of approving or disapproving every step we took so as not to permit any differences to arise between CIA's policies and his. But gradually our weekly intelligence reports became more ominous. The North Vietnamese troops were not only still there, they were moving out to expand the area they and their Pathet Lao puppets controlled, pushing the tribal Meo [Hmong] away from their settlements, or absorbing those who did not flee, as well as attacking the neutralist forces.¹⁷

Harriman relented and Air America was allowed to resupply the Hmong irregulars secretly with small amounts of ammunition and food. CIA case officers in Laos were told that "it was only to be used for defensive fighting ... not [for] initiating actions against the North Vietnamese or the Pathet Lao."¹⁸

The Lao coalition government, as permitted in the Protocol to the Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos, was also seeking U.S. military defensive materials. Article Six stated "The introduction into Laos of armaments, munitions, and war material generally, except such quantities of conventional armaments as the Royal Lao government may consider necessary for the national defense of Laos, is prohibited."¹⁹ On 10 September 1962, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma sent a letter to Ambassador Unger requesting repair parts and supplies for U.S.-furnished equipment, training ammunition, petroleum, oils and lubricants, building supplies, and clothing. Unger responded on 12 October:

My formal affirmative reply to this request will be forthcoming shortly, upon completion of certain internal administrative procedures within the United States Government in Washington. As I have informed

you orally, a small office has been established within and under the full control of the United States AID Mission to Laos. This unit ... is responsible for determining jointly with the ... Royal Lao Government the required quantities and types of materials ... specified in your letter, and for seeing to their shipment to Laos.²⁰

Six days after the American MAAG had formally departed Vientiane the U.S. Ambassador was acknowledging a new military assistance program to Laos.

The Rebirth of Covert U.S. Military Assistance

Ambassador Unger's 12 October letter to Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma disclosed the existence of a new office within the USAID Mission to Laos. Unger, like his predecessor some seven years earlier, had no embassy infrastructure for conducting a military assistance operation. In 1955 the U.S. State Department had finessed Article Six of the 1954 Geneva agreements by creating a Program Evaluations Office. In October 1962, the U.S. faced a similar constraint with Article Four of the 1962 Geneva Protocol which stated, "The introduction of foreign regular and irregular troops, foreign para-military formations and foreign military personnel into Laos is prohibited."²¹

The Kennedy administration, as a result of Averell Harriman's forceful recommendation, intended to comply fully with the Geneva agreements. But the growing awareness in Washington that the Soviets were unable to enforce Pushkin's promises brought the agreements into a more pragmatic focus. According to Douglas S. Blaufarb, CIA Station Chief in

Vientiane 1964-6:

the U.S. position with respect to the [1962] Accords was that, in order to preserve the essence of an independent and neutral Laos, certain limited and carefully controlled departures from the implementing protocols had to be undertaken. These would be discussed with Souvanna Phouma in advance and his views would be respected.²²

The creation of a "small office," as it was termed by Ambassador Unger, was one of America's first "controlled departures" from the agreements. Ostensibly under the control of the USAID program and designated the "Requirements Office" (USAID/RO), the unit was established to act as the in-country component of a highly classified, Thailand based, joint U.S. military assistance organization.²³

DEPCHIEF

As early as August 1962 President Kennedy approved plans for a new covert U.S. military assistance program to Laos.²⁴ The day after General Tucker withdrew from Laos the U.S. MAAG he established and took command of Deputy Chief, Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Thailand (DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI). Deliberately placed within the structure of the U.S. Military Advisory Group in Thailand, DEPCHIEF, as it was commonly known, was in fact an entirely "separate entity" with orders to undertake the "planning, programming, requisitioning, receipt and storage in Thailand, [and] onward shipment to Laos" of U.S. MAP [Military Assistance Program] materials.²⁵ If questioned by the press, military authorities were ordered to say that DEPCHIEF was a supplement to the on-going U.S.

MAP effort in Thailand, "particularly in the fields of civic action and counter-subversion."²⁶

DEPCHIEF was headquartered at the Capital hotel in Bangkok and reported directly to CINCPAC. Personnel initially consisted of approximately thirty-nine officers, seventy-eight enlisted men, and a handful of carefully selected Thai civilian employees. Organizationally DEPCHIEF was divided into five divisions; Air Force, Comptroller, Logistics, Intelligence, and Plans and Training. Detachments were located at a 380-acre munitions storage facility located five miles south of Udorn, code-named "Peppergrinder;" at the Air America facility, Udorn air base; and at the Thai port of Sattahip. DEPCHIEF also operated a large warehouse facility, code-named "Redcap," at Bangkok's Don Muang airport.²⁷

The USAID Requirements Office, an integral element of DEPCHIEF, was staffed by about thirty retired U.S. military officers and enlisted men. The Americans were supplemented by recently returned third country technicians who "assisted the FAR logistics organization with maintenance skills not available to the FAR."²⁸ With few exceptions, Thailand-based DEPCHIEF personnel were not allowed in Laos, making the Requirements Office the "eyes and ears" of the U.S. military assistance program to Laos. Military responsibilities notwithstanding, DEPCHIEF and particularly the RO, operated under the tight control and authority of the U.S. Ambassador to Laos.

The Kennedy Letter

Leonard Unger went to Vientiane at a time when the president had just issued unprecedented authority to U.S. diplomatic posts abroad. In the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs failure President Kennedy decided to shake up the State Department. According to Arthur Schlesinger, "Kennedy had come to the Presidency determined to make the Department of State the central point, below the Presidency itself, in the conduct of foreign affairs." In a period of just four months the president had been confronted with foreign policy crises in Laos and Cuba. Kennedy found the State Department sorely deficient in providing him critical counsel, and the president began calling the State Department "a bowl of jelly".²⁹

On 29 May 1961, in an effort to correct these deficiencies and improve the operation of America's diplomatic missions, President Kennedy issued a letter to each American ambassador abroad which said:

You are in charge of the entire U.S. Diplomatic Mission, and I expect you to supervise all of its operations. The Mission includes not only the personnel of the Department of State and the Foreign Service, but also representatives of all other United States agencies.... As you know, the United States Diplomatic Mission ... does not ... include United States military forces operating in the field where such forces are under the command of a United States area military commander.³⁰

The letter "gave every ambassador for the first time the authority to know everything the CIA people were doing in his country (even if not always the way they were doing it)."³¹ And, in the special circumstances which existed in post-

October 1962 Laos, where the U.S. was engaged in military activities without an "area military commander," the ambassador acquired unprecedented military power.³²

The U.S. ambassador to Laos became the immediate controlling authority for:

all the functions of a Military Assistance Advisory Group, some of the functions of a U.S. military command, and numerous unconventional activities in support of irregular troops, including a requirement for airborne logistics ... in circumstances which prohibited an avowed military presence of the type normally considered essential.³³

The Kennedy letter became, with significant consequences for U.S. policy in Laos, a holy writ for a series of strong-willed U.S. ambassadors in Vientiane.

Internal Dissension

The 1962 Geneva agreements removed the specter of international confrontation in Laos, but accomplished little toward resolving the kingdom's internal problems. Souvanna Phouma was left with the improbable task of presiding over a coalition government comprised of three armed camps. In late 1962, to the surprise of few, the tripartite government of Laos began to unravel.

For nearly two years Pathet Lao military commanders had shared their Soviet supplied equipment with Kong Le and his neutralist army. In October 1962, anticipating an end to the Soviet airlift, the Pathet Lao began denying resupply to the neutralists. The communists were also agitated by Souvanna's arrangements for American military shipments to the Phoumi

army and his approval of aid to the Hmong irregulars.

The prince reacted to the Pathet Lao actions by requesting U.S. resupply flights to Kong Le's forces on the Plain of Jars. The Pathet Lao viewed this flight activity as "subversive" and on 27 November a neutralist anti-aircraft artillery unit, acting on the orders of a pro-Communist officer, shot down an Air America C-46 transport. Kong Le was outraged by the treachery, but prevented by the Pathet Lao from taking any action against the gunners. Shortly thereafter about four hundred neutralists defected to the Pathet Lao.³⁴

The Pathet Lao and neutralists then embarked on a bitter succession of military clashes and assassinations both on the Plain of Jars and in Vientiane. Ketsana Vongsavong, a close associate of Kong Le and Souvanna, was killed on 12 February 1963, allegedly by communist agents. On 1 April a soldier believed to be loyal to Kong Le evened the score by gunning down Foreign Minister Quinim Pholsena, a left-leaning neutralist. The killing of Quinim and memories of their earlier imprisonment prompted Souphanouvong and several other Pathet Lao officials to leave Vientiane for the safety of their Khang Khay headquarters. Meanwhile, shooting between the Pathet Lao and the neutralists had forced Kong Le to move his troops to the extreme western third of the Plain of Jars. The coalition cabinet was effectively ended.³⁵

Moscow Backs Out

Although the North Vietnamese were in Laos to stay, Hanoi's Soviet patrons had decided it was time to move on. Following the signing of the 1962 accords, Premier Khrushchev told Prince Souphanouvong the "main task" in Laos was now "political." Aleksandr Abramov, the departing Soviet Ambassador to Laos, told a senior ICC official in August that the formation of the tripartite government and the signing of the Geneva agreements were "great achievements of the policy of peaceful coexistence and important links in East-West dialogue."³⁶ On 2 December the Soviets officially ended their Lao airlift by turning over nine IL-2 transport aircraft to the coalition government. The planes were to be divided evenly among the three factions. Pointedly, the Soviets also gave the North Vietnamese the larger IL-14's used during the airlift. Although the Soviets would continue to maintain an embassy in Vientiane, Moscow had deliberately forfeited any important role in Laotian affairs.³⁷

The Soviet exit from Laos has a number of plausible explanations. Charles Stevenson ascribes the Soviet withdrawal to preoccupation with the missile crisis in Cuba and the Sino-Indian border war.³⁸ The Kremlin leaders were also hopeful that diplomatic success in Laos would pave the way for the reopening of the Berlin negotiations.³⁹ Whatever their motivation, the Soviets no longer considered Laos worthy of high level discussions. In July 1963 Averell Harriman, in

Moscow to negotiate a nuclear test ban treaty, raised the issue of Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese violations of the Geneva agreements. Khrushchev, according to Harriman, brushed off the subject and said, "It's time to go to dinner; we haven't got time to talk about Laos. Why do we want to bother with Laos? I have no interest in Laos."⁴⁰

A Plausibly Deniable Army

Washington clearly did not share Moscow's attitude toward Laos. Tightly controlled CIA "defensive" shipments to the Hmong during the summer of 1962 eventually gave way to the creation of a U.S.-organized Hmong paramilitary program. The CIA became the program's executive agent and, at the direction of the president and the National Security Council, began recruiting, training, and directing a tribal army.

According to William Colby the decidedly military task was given to the CIA "to avoid the necessity for uniformed U.S. involvement in Laos."⁴¹

The lowland-bound Royal Lao Army, despite American military aid, was not going to go outside the narrow limits of the Mekong plain to engage the Communists. And the American military ... had no desire to set up the long logistics lines a regular American military force would require in Laos.⁴²

Turning the job over to the CIA, as Ambassador Colby would readily agree, also provided an important measure of plausible U.S. deniability.⁴³ Under questioning in 1975 by a U.S. Senate intelligence oversight committee, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger provided two reasons for assigning the

operation to the CIA: "one, to avoid a formal avowal of American participation there for diplomatic reasons, and the second, I suspect, because it was less accountable."⁴⁴

The CIA was well prepared for the assignment. Following contact with Vang Pao in 1961 CIA agent James W. Lair sent his headquarters an eighteen page cable outlining the Hmong paramilitary potential. Desmond FitzGerald, then CIA Far East chief and a long time proponent of paramilitary operations, agreed that the Hmong offered the best hope for an indigenous Lao fighting force. By mid-1963 the CIA had instituted a vigorous, Thailand-based, offensive oriented paramilitary training program for Vang Pao's men.⁴⁵

Initially, CIA case officers selected 750 Hmong and sent them to the PARU center at Hua Hin, Thailand for training in guerilla warfare tactics and the use of modern weapons and radios.⁴⁶ The Hmong were returned to Laos and soon saw action against communist-held Hmong villages throughout northeastern Laos. Once freed from Pathet Lao control, the villages were fortified and defended by Hmong soldiers. Lima sites, the unimproved landing strips surveyed by Major Aderholt and others, were also built alongside the villages to accommodate aerial resupply flights.⁴⁷

Additionally, in the coming months and years many of these young men would be transported by Air America and U.S. military aircraft into communist-controlled areas of northeastern Laos and western North Vietnam. The mission of

these ten-to-twelve man "Road Watch" teams was to observe and report back to CIA case officers on Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese activity. When deemed useful, the Hmong also carried out harassment raids on enemy forces and, when reinforced, engaged in set battles.⁴⁸ The significant partnership which developed between these Hmong "Road Watch" teams and American airpower will be examined in chapter six.

Flying Rice and Weapons

The war in Laos and the development of the irregular army considerably disrupted the Hmong villagers. Military service, for even short periods of time, caused family hardships and neglect of crops and livestock. Isolated village outposts required dependable resupply of food and military supplies. CIA advisors quickly recognized that if the Hmong army was to be successful the agency would have to insure the soldiers and their families received regular deliveries of food and military equipment. According to a senior CIA official:

The knowledge that their families would be cared for ... was a factor in persuading the tribesmen to join the irregulars, for in those hills the only protection for a village rests with the men of that village. Thus a tribesman was unlikely to accept a commitment to serve as a full-time soldier away from his home unless he was assured that his family would be cared for in his absence.⁴⁹

The air link to the Hmong had to be expanded.

In January 1962 the original Air America-MAAG, Laos contract had been modified by the U.S. Embassy in Laos to include the services of seven U-6 "Beaver" single-engine

aircraft. Two months later the embassy again changed the contract to provide for the services of one each C-45, C-46, C-47, and DC-4 multi-engine airplanes.⁵⁰ The agreement does not mention U-10 Helio-Couriers, but these Short Take-Off and Landing (STOL) aircraft were also being widely used in Laos.⁵¹ Thus, in the post-Geneva 1962 period, Air America was well equipped to handle increasingly diverse and perilous missions.

The creation of the rough dirt and grass Lima sites, which numbered nearly three hundred by 1970, provided mountaintop or mountainside landing zones throughout Laos.⁵² However, the strips were often treacherous to land on and the absence of navigational aids called for extraordinary flying skills. Aircraft landings and take-offs often occurred within minimum flight restrictions and mistakes could easily result in an aircraft and its crew slipping off the side of a three thousand foot cliff. Parachute drops were conducted in areas without Lima sites, or where territory was judged unsafe to land. This work also required considerable expertise as crewmen in the rear of the aircraft, called "kickers," shoved out pallets of food and military supplies, and sometimes even live animals, to waiting villagers below.⁵³

In addition to Air America the U.S. government also hired Bird and Sons, a small civilian contract airline, to fly supplies and men in and out of Laos. The airline, which began operating in mainland Southeast Asia in 1958, employed about fifty-five pilots and flew a variety of small and medium

transports from Vientiane and Udorn. Bird and Sons, like Air America, flew both CIA and USAID operations.⁵⁴ In September 1965 Bird and Sons was sold to Continental Air Lines and became known as Continental Air Services, Incorporated (CASI). The new company continued the policy of flying both covert and overt missions.⁵⁵

USAID Laos

Most of the work performed in Laos by Air America and the other contract air carriers represented the final stage of a complex U.S. military and economic aid pipeline to Laos. This activity could not have been successful without the full support of USAID Laos. Ostensibly a non-military agency, USAID Laos was intimately involved in the distribution of military assistance. The decision to use USAID for military functions was, according to a 1970 statement by USAID administrator John A. Hannah, unprecedented and the agency preferred "to get rid of this kind of operation."⁵⁶

USAID Laos was, of course, also involved in more traditional "nation-building" projects such as education, health, and road construction.⁵⁷ But, in Laos, all of these efforts had military applications. Placing the Requirements Office within USAID was, therefore, not only expedient but practical. USAID's involvement in military affairs also offered DEPCHEIF and CIA a very useful financial association; as will be examined below.

The importance of bureaucratic paperwork notwithstanding,

USAID Laos' greatest contributions to Lao security took place in the field. One of USAID's most significant efforts, and an example of the relationship between economic development and military security, was the Refugee Relief Program. In a 1972 assessment of the program Douglas Blaufarb noted that:

USAID refugee relief has been much more than the name suggests. It is a fully-integrated and quite essential element of the [CIA] tribal program. Particularly in the Meo [Hmong] region it has strong field representation ... and it participates closely with Vang Pao and the CIA in Meo [Hmong] operations. It has access to the same aircraft used by CIA for air transport. Through a small group of AID personnel and a larger number of Lao employees, ... [USAID] maintains an up-to-date status report on the refugee population, location, and needs, and prepares a daily schedule of supply deliveries.⁵⁸

CIA officers, Air America crews, and USAID employees were, quite literally, standing elbow to elbow in the management of the emerging covert war in Laos.

The Continuing Thai Connection

Bangkok's cooperation and support continued to be indispensable to American covert operations in Laos. Thai airfields provided secure maintenance and support facilities for U.S. civilian and military aircraft flying into Laos. PARU teams and Royal Thai Army artillery units were busily engaged in training Hmong and Lao soldiers, both in Laos and Thailand. DEPCHEIF programs, particularly those relating to logistics storage and transport of materials to Laos, were made possible through the efforts of the Thai military.

It was not surprising therefore, as U.S.-Thai involvement

in Laos escalated, that the CIA decided to formalize its relationship with the Thai military. In late 1962 the CIA established at Udorn, Thailand the 4802d Joint Liaison Detachment (JLD).⁵⁹ Headed by James Lair, the JLD began a close working relationship with a Thai military unit called "Headquarters 333."⁶⁰ The two organizations, comprised of about thirty-five to forty Americans and a slightly greater number of Thais, acted as a joint U.S.-Thai command center for covert military and intelligence collection activities in Laos.⁶¹ In the years to come the 4802d and "Headquarters 333" would oversee a spiralling U.S.-Thai commitment to Lao defense.

The Geneva agreements of 1962 resulted in a superpower sleight of hand. Moscow, unable to enforce Pushkin's pledge to halt North Vietnamese trespass of Laos, decided to turn a blind eye to the kingdom. Washington, increasingly concerned with Vietnam and confident Moscow would not intervene in Laos so long as U.S. ground forces did not enter the country, embarked with Thailand on a complex covert military assistance program to Laos.

There is no question that in late 1962, with good reason, the United States and Thailand were in direct violation of the Geneva agreements. But, as long as the U.S.-Thai activity was conducted "quietly," the superpowers chose to ignore the obvious.

ENDNOTES FOR CHAPTER IV

1. Rostow, Diffusion of Power, 290. In a letter to me Professor Rostow stated bluntly "... not for one day did Hanoi honor the Laos 1962 Accords and stop transitting Laos en route to [South] Vietnam." Walt W. Rostow, letter to the author, 28 February 1990.
2. Modelski, Settlement of the Laotian Question, 144.
3. Norman B. Hannah, The Key to Failure: Laos and the Vietnam War (New York: Madison Books, 1987) 37-8. See also Harriman interview by Schlesinger, 17 January 1965, p. 58.
4. My interview with Ambassador Leonard Unger, Washington, D.C., 3 May 1988.
5. Ibid.
6. USAID, Facts, 27. A small French military training mission was excepted.
7. Hilsman, To Move a Nation, 151.
8. Ibid., 151-2.
9. My interview with Felt, 1 March 1990.
10. Major General Tucker had succeeded Brigadier General Boyle in early 1963. Wing, Case Study, 22 and A38.
11. The Vientiane government, of course, had never made any such request. Dommen, Conflict, 240.
12. William E. Colby, Honorable Men (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978) 192.

13. Langer and Zasloff, North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao, 80-1.
14. My interviews with Ambassador Leonard Unger, Washington, D.C., 3 May 1988, and Rockville, Maryland, 21 May 1989. Unger would later serve as U.S. Ambassador in both Thailand and the Republic of China.
15. As cited in Randolph, The U.S. and Thailand, 41.
16. My interview with Unger, 3 May 1988.
17. Colby, Honorable Men, 192-3, and my interview with Ambassador William E. Colby, Washington, D.C., 3 May 1988.
18. At the time there were two CIA case officers in Laos. Ibid.
19. USAID, Facts, 28.
20. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad, Hearings, United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad, Kingdom of Laos, 91st Cong., 1st sess., 1969, 441-3. (Hereafter referred to as U.S., Laos Hearings).
21. USAID, Facts, 27.
22. Douglas S. Blaufarb, "Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos," (Rand Corp. 1972. Reprinted by Dalley Book Service, Christiansburg, Virginia) 19, and my interview (by telephone) with Douglas S. Blaufarb, Lehigh, West Virginia, 18 March 1988.

23. St. Jean, McClain, and Hartwig, "Twenty-Three Years of Military Assistance to Laos," 35.
24. Wood letter, 12 September 1962.
25. CINCPAC letter, Admiral H. D. Felt to Colonel D.F. Munster, Executive Officer, DEPCHIEF, 8 March 1963. (Letter in my possession). The Military Assistance Program (MAP) was established under the U.S. Foreign Assistance Act of 1961.
26. Wood letter, 12 September 1962.
27. Doty and Widner, MAAG in Exile, 32-3, and U.S., Laos Hearings, 529.
28. Blaufarb, "Unconventional War in Laos," 45-6.
29. Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, 406-7.
30. Cited in Futrell, "United States Policy," 144.
31. Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, 428.
32. See, for example, testimony of Ambassador William H. Sullivan, U.S., Laos Hearings, 486-8, and 517-8.
33. Blaufarb, "Unconventional War in Laos," 20.
34. Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 89-90, and Porter, "After Geneva," 188-92. According to Stevenson on 6 January 1963 renegade neutralists shot down another Air America aircraft. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 189.
35. Dommen, Conflict, 247-8, and Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 188-90.
36. Thee, Notes of a Witness, 325-6, and 334.
37. Dommen, Conflict, 246-7
38. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 191.

39. Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 89.
40. Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Georgi Pushkin, Harriman's Geneva confederate, was by this time dead. Harriman interview by Schlesinger, 17 January 1965, p. 59.
41. Congress, Senate, Senate Committee on Armed Services, Hearing, Nomination of William E. Colby to be Director of Central Intelligence: Hearing before the Committee on Armed Services, 93d Cong., 1st sess., 1973, 28.
42. Colby, Honorable Men, 194.
43. Colby has referred to the Lao clandestine operation as "courage in civilian clothes." Remarks made during dedication of Air America-Civil Air Transport archives, Dallas, Texas, 30 May 1987. (Video tape in my possession).
44. Kissinger also told the committee "I do not believe in retrospect that it was good national policy to have the CIA conduct the war in Laos. I think we should have found some other way of doing it. And to use the CIA simply because it is less accountable for very visible major operations is poor national policy." Church Committee Report, Book I:157.
45. My interview with Lair, 15 April 1988, and Leary letter, 22 January 1991.
46. My interview with Cherry, 16 March 1979, and my interview with Yang Teng, San Diego, California, 27 October 1979. Yang Teng was a member of the original Hmong unit sent for training to Hua Hin. Over the coming years hundreds of Hmong would receive specialized training at Hua Hin and at similar CIA

administered camp at Phitsanuloke, a small town in northwestern Thailand. My interview with Shirley, 1 August 1990.

47. Many of the Thailand-trained Hmong became instructors at a newly created military training school at Long Tieng. The program, aided by American and Thai advisors, followed the Hua Hin curriculum. My interview with Yang Teng, 27 October 1979.

48. My interview with Thao Pao Ly, San Diego, California, 27 October 1979. Thao Pao Ly was a Hmong battalion commander.

49. Blaufarb, "Unconventional War in Laos," 42.

50. St. Jean, McClain, and Hartwig, "Twenty-Three Years of Military Assistance to Laos," 164-5. The U-6, formerly designated the L-20, was a high-wing, all-metal monoplane capable of carrying a pilot and six passengers. Bowers, Tactical Airlift, 826.

51. As noted in chapter three, footnote 72, and Leary letter, 22 January 1991.

52. "Air Facilities Data, Laos," Flight Information Center, Vientiane, Laos, May 1970. (Document in my possession).

53. My interviews with Lieutenant Colonel Richard E. Stuart, U.S. Air Force, retired, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 24 March 1988, James M. MacFarlane, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 13 May 1989, and Walker, 14 May 1989. All three men flew Air America fixed wing transports throughout Southeast Asia. Military dispatches to Vang Pao from field units reveal that air-dropped supplies frequently struck people on the ground,

causing serious injury and sometimes death. Despite Air America safety information campaigns, mountain people would often stand beneath the descending pallets. Likewise, villagers would occasionally run or walk into aircraft propeller or rotor blades. Ibid.

54. C.M. Plattner, "Continental Air Lines Diversifies with Southeast Asia Operations," Aviation Week & Space Technology, 30 August 1976, 37, and my interview with MacFarlane, 13 May 1989.

55. Plattner, "Continental Air Lines Diversifies with Southeast Asia Operations," Aviation Week & Space Technology, 30 August 1976, 37. This article, however, mistakenly suggests that CASI had no connection with the CIA. According to William M. Leary, CASI did fly clandestine missions for the agency. William M. Leary, letter to the author, 3 February 1991.

56. "An Interview with Dr. John A. Hannah, Administrator of USAID," in Laos: War and Revolution, ed. Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) 408.

57. For a brief official explanation of USAID responsibilities in Laos, see USAID, Facts, v-vii.

58. Blaufarb, "Unconventional War in Laos," 42.

59. Gravel, Pentagon Papers, V:305, and Congress, Senate, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia: January 1972. Staff Report Prepared for the Use of the Subcommittee on U.S. Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad of the Committee on Foreign

Relations, 92d Cong., 2d sess., 1972, 12. (Hereafter cited as U.S., Thailand, Laos, Cambodia: January 1972). On 30 September 1988 I submitted a Freedom of Information Act request to the CIA requesting information on five areas having to do with the 4802d JLD. The CIA replied on 20 April 1989 that, in keeping with security provisions dealing with operational matters, they could not provide the requested information. (Letter in my possession).

60. Following the Geneva accords, Lair and Landry left Laos and moved their paramilitary support operations to Nongkai, the major river crossing point between Thailand and Laos. Landry worked as Lair's deputy at the 4802d and succeeded the latter when he left Thailand in 1968 to attend the prestigious U.S. Army War College. My interviews with Shirley, Landry, and Lair, 17 August 1990, and my interview with Major General Thammarak Isarangura, Bangkok, Thailand, 13 September 1990.

61. Ibid. The presence of "Headquarters 333" and the 4802d JLD was never much of a secret in Thailand or Laos. A prominent Pathet Lao leader, Phoumi Vongvichit, wrote in 1969 "The whole system [of U.S. covert support to Laos] is directly under the U.S. "special forces" command, code-named H.Q. 333 and based in Oudone [Udorn]." Phoumi Vongvichit, Laos and the Victorious Struggle, 99.

CHAPTER V

SECSTATE THEATER OF WAR

According to pronouncements from the Western world, the war in Laos was limited to minor skirmishes. But minor or not, the blood I saw was real. There was the nineteen-year-old boy who had stepped on a land mine. He had been a soldier since he was fifteen. I saw another boy with part of his face shot away. I saw the blood, I saw the look in the eyes of the wounded, frightened soldiers. I felt that knot in my stomach that comes when war is no longer something you read about in newspapers.¹
-- Father Matt J. Menger, Sam Thong, Laos, 1963.

Pushing from Both Ends

Throughout 1963 and into early 1964 the United States, at Prime Minister Souvanna's behest, continued to resupply the rightist and neutralist armies. DEPCHIEF processed military aid shipments through Bangkok and up to the Thai-Lao border, where the material could be trucked or airlifted to the waiting forces. Similarly, a Hanoi administered military assistance program used Vietnamese truck convoys and Soviet built transport aircraft to keep Communist bloc supplies moving to the Pathet Lao. More than three hundred Vietnamese "construction workers" on the Plain of Jars appeared analogous to the DEPCHIEF and USAID/RO employees laboring in Bangkok and Vientiane. Unlike the U.S., however, the North Vietnamese had maintained a significant number of ground troops inside Laos. By mid-May 1963 Hanoi had deployed eleven People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) battalions, about five

thousand troops, to protect north to south cross-border trails. These units also provided support to the Pathet Lao.²

Meanwhile, the Lao internal military and political situation moved toward complete fracture. Neutralist troops on the western side of the Plain of Jars, now joined by rightist forces, were frequent targets of Vietnamese directed Pathet Lao artillery fire. On 6 June 1963 Souvanna publicly charged Pathet Lao-North Vietnamese collusion in the attacks and two weeks later halted government funds to Souphanouvong's faction. The action was significant because Souvanna had previously honored an agreement with North Vietnam not to acknowledge the presence of PAVN forces in Laos in exchange for their withdrawal after the Geneva accord.³

In Vientiane, right-wing police harassed the remaining Pathet Lao officials and their small security detachment. As a result, tripartite meetings on the Plain of Jars in December 1963 and direct talks between Souvanna and Souphanouvong in Sam Neua during mid-January 1964 explored the possibility of establishing Luang Prabang as a new "demilitarized" seat of government. The plan failed to materialize, however, as the Pathet Lao launched a late January military campaign in central Laos and fighting erupted between rightist/neutralist forces and communist positions on the Plain of Jars.⁴ It was painfully obvious that the three Lao factions were intent on using military means to solve a manifestly political problem.

Seeking goodwill, in early April Souvanna paid official

visits to Peking and Hanoi. The Chinese, who had previously championed Souvanna's neutralist position, received the prime minister with suspicion and cool formality. During an official banquet Premier Chou En-Lai accused American "imperialists", and by association Souvanna, with violating the Geneva agreements. A subsequent joint Chinese-Lao communique was less strident, with Chou calling for an internal Lao political settlement between the Pathet Lao, the neutralists, and the right-wing.⁵

The prime minister's call on the Hanoi leadership was not nearly as sociable. Throughout the visit one of Souvanna's aides was held virtually incommunicado and General Giap, commander of the PAVN, tersely told the prince that the Vietnamese "could not tolerate the presence of troops on the Plain of Jars other than those of the Pathet Lao."⁶ The North Vietnamese were not in a negotiating mood.

Upon returning home Souvanna arranged a Plain of Jars meeting with Prince Souphanouvong and General Phoumi. Hoping to provide a safe locale for all members of the coalition government, Souvanna once again suggested the three leaders declare Luang Prabang a "demilitarized" area. Failing to gain any agreement the dejected prime minister, now threatening resignation, returned to Vientiane. The following day, 19 April 1964, Souvanna was arrested by two right-wing generals, Kouprasith Abhay and Siho Lamphouthacoul.⁷

Ending the Tripartite Coalition

The events in Vientiane on the morning of April 19, 1964, marked a milestone in recent Lao history. Their importance was comparable to that of the events of August 8, 1960. The attempt by the rightist officers to take matters into their own hands ... shook the foundations of the coalition government. How ... could one believe that there was goodwill when supporters of one of the three parties were declaring flatly that they had replaced the tripartite government?"⁸

It was a question the United States was loathe to answer. DEPCHEIF and USAID/RO were working hard to train and supply the right, and to some extent the neutralist, military elements of the Lao government. Now, with the right-wing seizing power, Washington was forced to rebuke its Vientiane favorites or face a total breakdown of the tripartite government.

Ambassador Unger, who had been attending a diplomatic conference in South Vietnam, rushed back to Laos and quickly communicated American displeasure to the offending generals. Unger, supported by the other Western ambassadors, also urged King Savang Vatthana and General Phoumi to assist in the restoration of the Souvanna government. Faced with overwhelming Western opposition and a likely termination of military and economic assistance, on 22 April Kouprasith and Siho released Souvanna. The next day, in exchange for several political and military changes within the government, the generals agreed to support Souvanna's return to power.⁹

Oddly enough, while the right-wing was now in ascendancy, General Phoumi emerged from the coup a loser. Siho and

Kouprasith regarded Phoumi's power as excessive and wanted a share of the general's lucrative opium, gold, and gambling interests. On 2 May, acquiescing to Kouprasith and Siho, Souvanna personally replaced Phoumi as Minister of Defense, established a military committee to reorganize FAR command and control, and announced plans to merge the rightist and neutralist military factions.¹⁰

The U.S. supported the solution, feeling the need to back the generals while insuring Souvanna's presence as the symbol of a "neutral" government. Souphanouvong, correctly judging a de facto rightist takeover and the end of any neutralist influence within the coalition, demanded his brother reinstate the tripartite government. But Souvanna, under pressure from the right-wing, was no longer in a position to allow neutralist or Pathet Lao representation in his cabinet. On 3 June 1964 Souphanouvong declared that the Pathet Lao no longer considered Souvanna prime minister, thereby ending any further pretense of Communist participation in the Royal Lao government.¹¹

Returning to the Battlefield

Warfare is a dynamic process which constantly engenders new killing technology. A successful and professional military must constantly update its weaponry or risk destruction by a more technically superior armed force. Technology alone, of course, cannot insure military dominance. It does, nonetheless, offer a means by which even small

countries can prevail in the face of more powerful, but less technologically advanced, adversaries.

Despite years of American effort the Royal Lao military was not, and likely would never become, a match for the PAVN. It was predictable, therefore, that the United States would eventually decide to boost the Lao government's military capability against the communists by providing the FAR with more advanced weapons and, in particular, combat capable aircraft.

The Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF) upgrade began in August 1963 when the United States gave the Souvanna government six T-28 airplanes and provided a U.S. Air Force Mobile Training Team (MMT) for initial instruction and maintenance services at Vientiane's Wattay airfield.¹² The intended use and U.S. control over these airplanes is outlined in a 26 October 1963 message from the U.S. State Department to Ambassador Unger:

We are not rpt [repeat] not yet prepared to authorize use of T-28's ... except in response to certain clearly aggressive PL actions. Reaffirm, however, previous authorization for T-28's to attempt intercept and down any NVN illegal supply flights. Do not rpt not approve use of bombs for cratering Route 7. Washington approval should be requested for types of other possible uses you would recommend for bombs.¹³

In the words of the U.S. Air Force Attache in Vientiane at the time, "They had six T-28's with .50 caliber guns. They had never dropped a bomb, and that was the extent of the tactical Lao Air Force. I don't believe they were able to keep more than three of those six in commission at any one time."¹⁴ It

was apparent that if the U.S. wanted a combat effective Lao air force it would have to provide the Lao a higher level of training and repair support. Such activity in Laos, however, would have been an obvious violation of the Geneva agreements.

Project Waterpump

On 6 December 1963, CINCPAC recommended to the Secretary of Defense that a T-28 Air Commando detachment from the USAF Special Air Warfare center at Eglin Air Force base, Florida, be deployed to Udorn, Thailand to "provide realistic operational experience to RLAF aircrews and to provide a ready operational force to augment the RLAF as required."¹⁵

In mid-March 1964, thirty-eight U.S. Air Force officers and enlisted men of Detachment 6, 1st Air Commando Wing, code-named "Waterpump," arrived in Saigon, South Vietnam. Half the group remained temporarily in Vietnam to assemble four crated T-28's, while the rest departed for Thailand. Using Air America equipment at Udorn, the detachment established a T-28 maintenance facility and immediately began a T-28 ground and flight school for Thai and Lao pilots. The pilots were well qualified flyers, but most had difficulty mastering American bombing tactics. By mid-May "Waterpump," augmented with additional T-28's from South Vietnam, had more than a dozen graduates flying daily bombing and reconnaissance missions over Laos. For identification, and as a measure of competence, the American flyers were called the "A" Team, while the Thai pilots were designated the "B" Team, and the

Lao were the "C" Team.¹⁶

To coordinate this activity the State Department directed the establishment of a primary Air Operations Center (AOC) at Wattay and a subordinate AOC at Lao Air Force headquarters in Savannakhet. The AOCs were outfitted by the "Waterpump" team with communications equipment and map, targeting, and pilot briefing rooms. "Waterpump" personnel in civilian clothes staffed the Wattay AOC and were required to return to Thailand every evening. Eventually, however, this restriction was relaxed and the men were allowed to reside in Vientiane. A similar situation existed at Savannakhet, where a U.S. Air Force Assistant Air Attache was placed in command. In addition to manning the AOCs, "Waterpump" airmen, who were designated "civilians" by the U.S. embassy in Vientiane, assisted the Lao air force at Wattay and Savannakhet with maintenance and bomb loading tasks.¹⁷

On 27 April, while Vientiane was embroiled in political turmoil, the Pathet Lao launched a heavy attack against Kong Le's forces. According to Charles Stevenson, the assault was carried out in response to Souvanna's departure from the accords and after a series of FAR and Hmong operations against communist positions along the border and on the southern edge of the Plain of Jars.¹⁸

Washington's reaction was to follow the Kennedy strategy, and President Johnson ordered a troop alert on Okinawa and directed the Seventh Fleet, already in the South China Sea,

to prepare for military action.¹⁹ Of more immediate importance, the "Waterpump" supported Thai and Lao pilots were ordered to begin a stepped up bombing and reconnaissance campaign against communist positions on the plain. While the aerial assault halted what might have been Kong Le's complete destruction, by 16 May the neutralists had been driven off the plain and thousands of Hmong villagers were streaming south.²⁰

The Issue of U.S. Aerial Reconnaissance

The performance of the Thai and Lao pilots, as demonstrated during their training at Udorn, was competent but far less skilled than what American pilots could provide or what Washington now desired. During a 29 April 1964 National Security Council meeting security aides showed President Johnson U-2 reconnaissance photography "which revealed major improvements in road networks [in Laos], the effect of which is to improve Hanoi's ability to back up forces in Laos or in South Vietnam." The North Vietnamese construction spread from Route 12, located east of Thakek, down to Tchepone, a Laotian town situated directly west of the demilitarized zone between North and South Vietnam.²¹ Therefore, while the fighting on the Plain of Jars represented a serious escalation of Lao hostilities, it was also a useful catalyst for increased U.S. military reconnaissance of communist infiltration activity along the Laotian-South Vietnamese border.²²

This intelligence opportunity was discussed in an urgent 18 May 1964 teleconference between senior White House,

SECSTATE, DOD, and CIA officials in Washington and Ambassador Unger in Vientiane. Unger had just reported via cable to the State Department that Souvanna had rejected an American request for low-level jet reconnaissance flights over Laos. According to Unger's message, Souvanna requested the flights not take place at this time, "believing such action would be exploited by [the] communists (and perhaps others) as direct military intervention." Unger concurred with the prime minister that the overflights were not a good idea.²³

Nevertheless, seeking to bolster a reclama to the prince, the Washington group recounted to Unger the advantages of reconnaissance activity over Laos. "Way of pinpointing targets ... morale effect in conjunction with increasing and more effective T-28 operations ... non-combat operation designed to give him [Souvanna] facts on situation." The officials added, "We believe all these warrant operation in themselves, but also have in mind golden chance to route aircraft over Tchepone area on way north." The Washington policy makers then told Unger:

We do not have in mind authorizing this [overflights] at once if Souvanna opposed but are considering groundwork from which we might proceed in day or two even without his consent.... Would Souvanna be really upset if we did?²⁴

Available records do not indicate when and how Unger conveyed Washington's wishes to Souvanna, but U.S. Air Force RF-101's and U.S. Navy RF-8A and RA-3B jet reconnaissance flights, called "Yankee Team," first flew over southern Laos

on 19 May and began flights over the Plain of Jars two days later. According to a State Department account submitted to a 1969 U.S. Congressional committee, Souvanna approved the flights on 18 May and issued a communique on 28 May endorsing the flights as "necessary to observe Communist violations of the accords."²⁵

The facts do not support this early approval by the prime minister. First, it was on 18 May that Ambassador Unger reported Souvanna's opposition to the reconnaissance flights. If the Congressional testimony is correct, Souvanna was persuaded in a matter of hours to reverse his negative position on the reconnaissance flights.²⁶ Such a rapid change of heart is improbable. Moreover, Ambassador Unger recalls showing Souvanna the first "Yankee Team" photography. In Unger's words, "Souvanna was very stressed and upset, but still did not want to give his approval for the flights. He condoned it [by not objecting] ... but never really supported the flights. He never said you must not do this." (Emphasis added). Souvanna's great fear, according to Unger, was that Laos would again be dragged into the greater battle for Indochina.²⁷

Air America's T-28 Strike Force

The 18 May Washington-Vientiane teleconference also revealed another major change in U.S. policy toward Laos: the decision to use American civilians to fly T-28 combat missions over Laos. Unger observed in his 18 May cable that the U.S.,

if willing to authorize American low-level reconnaissance flights over Laos, should also find acceptable the use of American piloted T-28's in Laos. The Washington group responded:

On T-28's we still not rpt not prepared to authorize US military personnel to fly these in PDJ [Plain of Jars] combat. Instead we now repeat now propose turn over the four now rpt now [deleted] at once to Lao, fly them up to Vientiane with bombs... and let them be operated by US civilian pilots.²⁸

CIA and Air America officials in Vientiane quickly and secretly recruited U.S. civilian pilots to the fly the T-28. Thomas G. Jenny, a former U.S. Marine Corps pilot who was now flying U-10 Helio-Couriers for Air America, recalls that he and four other Air America pilots were called by a supervisor to a meeting at the Air America Station Manager's office. A CIA official asked the pilots if they were willing to fly RLAF marked T-28's on specified, CIA controlled, attack missions. All agreed and were told by the CIA officer they would soon receive familiarization training at Udorn.²⁹

On 20 May Unger requested formal State Department authority to use Air America-piloted T-28's. The ambassador also advised that Souvanna had agreed to the use of the American civilians and discussions were underway to:

issue papers to these pilots and [adjust] personnel records to "terminate" employment with Air America or Bird so that pilots would have status of civilian technicians hired individually by RLG [Royal Lao Government].³⁰

Unger's request was approved by the Department of State on the same day.³¹

Meanwhile, the JCS had ordered CINCPAC to immediately transfer five T-28's and five RT-28's from U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) to the "Waterpump" unit. The JCS message noted that the T-28's would be "immediately painted with RLAF markings" and "picked up ... by civilian pilots or RLAF pilots as indicated by Ambassador Unger."³²

Two days after Unger received formal State Department authority to use the civilian pilots, the "Waterpump" unit began T-28 refresher training for the six Air America volunteers. The group, all former military pilots with T-28 experience, spent two days on strafing and bombing practice (dropping napalm and 500 lb bombs) and were judged by the "Waterpump" instructors as highly qualified for combat.³³

On 25 and 26 May the Air America "strike force," more commonly called the "A" Team, attacked targets on the Plain of Jars.³⁴ Reportedly, during this time Major Drexel B. Cochran, "Waterpump" commander, also flew at least one authorized strike mission against targets on the Plain of Jars.³⁵ Ambassador Unger, acutely aware of the international implications should one of the Americans be shot-down, remained in the Air America operations building during all of these strike missions.³⁶ The State Department, with Ambassador Unger the on-scene commander, now exercised control over an American and Thai piloted combat aircraft squadron.

Expanding the Air War in Laos

On 6 June 1964 a U.S. Navy RF-8A "Yankee Team"

reconnaissance jet flown by Lieutenant Charles F. Klusmann was downed by communist gunfire while on a mission over the northeastern corner of the Plain of Jars. Within an hour Air America transport planes had located the pilot and called for a rescue pick-up by Air America H-34's. As the helicopters descended they were hit by gunfire and an observer was killed. Four Thai-piloted T-28's were then dispatched from Vientiane to provide cover for the rescue. The Thai's were unable to find their target and a decision was made to send in the "A" Team T-28's. By the time the Americans reached the scene, however, the Pathet Lao had removed Klusmann from the area.³⁷ The next day, while flying in the same area, another Navy aircraft was hit. The pilot parachuted safely to the ground and was picked up the following day by an Air America H-34 helicopter.³⁸

The loss of the two reconnaissance aircraft resulted in immediate American action. Air America "Strike Force" T-28's, directed by CIA agents in an orbiting transport aircraft, struck communist positions all over the northeastern corner of the plain. The T-28's, according to one of the American pilots, were "officially" flying in support of the search for the downed Navy flyers. In reality CIA was ordering them to destroy previously identified targets.³⁹ A more forceful display of U.S. anger and resolve occurred on 9 June when eight U.S. Air Force F-100's attacked a communist anti-aircraft position at Xieng Khouang on the Plain of Jars.⁴⁰

For Air America the 8 June rescue of the Navy pilot was a proud accomplishment and the first of many military "saves" to come. Nonetheless, CINCPAC's initial reaction to the shoot-downs was to propose the deployment to Udorn of U.S. Marine Corps rescue helicopters. The idea was shelved when it was recognized that U.S. marked military aircraft could not be prepositioned legally in Laos and reaction time from Udorn would be too slow. Consequently, COMUSMACV recommended to JCS that Air America be provided with five additional H-34's and the contract between DEPCHIEF and Air America be changed to include military rescue work.⁴¹ After some resistance from Admiral Felt at CINCPAC, the Secretary of Defense ordered four H-34's delivered to Air America.⁴² It was a wise investment.

The Chinese Connection

Two days after the F-100 air strikes, and apparently without the authority of the U.S., Thai-piloted RLAF T-28's attacked the Pathet Lao headquarters at Khang Khay and damaged the Chinese Economic Mission building, killing a civilian.⁴³ These raids were not publicized, and the U.S. did not comment on the matter until it was revealed by the PRC's New China News Agency. The Chinese blamed the United States and called the act a "new debt of blood."⁴⁴ Prince Souphanouvong also charged that the strikes were conducted by American flown T-28's "with jets flying cover overhead."⁴⁵ The United States denied any involvement in the raids, and the U.S. Air Force Air Attache in Vientiane, Colonel Robert L.F. Tyrrell, has

recalled that "we suspected that they [Thai pilots] were getting instructions maybe from their own government to hit other than briefed targets."⁴⁶

The attack on Khang Khay exacerbated an already tense situation between Vientiane and Beijing. On 9 June the People's Daily had declared "the Geneva Agreements are in danger of being completely wrecked." Shortly thereafter the PRC began to attack Souvanna personally. In turn, Souvanna challenged the presence of two long standing Chinese organizations in Laos: the PRC Economic and Cultural Mission in Khang Khay and the Chinese "road builders" in northern Laos. The Chinese responded by asserting that Souvanna had asked for the establishment of the Khang Khay Mission in 1961 and that all road building efforts had ceased in 1963. They rebuked Souvanna for his "absurd and incredible ... lack of good faith." This flurry of accusations represented an important turning point for PRC-RLG relations; from this time forward the PRC refused to recognize Souvanna's administration as the legitimate government of Laos.⁴⁷

It was not surprising that Souvanna had finally called attention to the Chinese activities at Khang Khay. In 1962 the Royal Lao government had agreed to the Chinese "economic and cultural" presence. At that time the Lao also agreed to Chinese assistance in building a "goodwill" road to connect the northern Lao town of Phong Saly with the village of Mengla in China's Yunnan province. In the intervening years,

however, it had become increasingly apparent the Chinese were using the mission and the "road builders" for more than strictly cultural and humanitarian purposes.⁴⁸

According to the U.S. Congressional testimony of William Sullivan, the Chinese Mission at Khang Khay was headed by a People's Liberation Army (PLA) general officer. The Chinese were suspected by U.S. intelligence sources of having other PLA officers present in Khang Khay to teach "training and tactics" as well as to facilitate the logistical movement of Chinese military aid to the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese armed forces in Laos.⁴⁹

However, the most extensive Chinese activities in Laos, by far, were the road building operations of the PLA engineering units. Initially, the Chinese worked on the Phong Saly to Mengla road. This fifty mile "Laotian-Chinese Friendship Highway" was officially dedicated and handed over to the Pathet Lao on 25 May 1963. Without Lao government consultation the Chinese then began to conduct numerous road surveys and built a series of "feeder roads" near the Yunnan border. Moreover, there were growing indications that the Chinese intended to extend their "friendship" roads toward the south and Thailand. The presence of the Chinese, variously estimated at between three and ten thousand men, and their roads was a legitimate concern to the Vientiane government.⁵⁰

The FAR as a "Tripwire"

In early May 1964 the State Department queried the American embassy in Vientiane on the merits of reintroducing a U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group into Laos "as a means of demonstrating U.S. intent." Ambassador Unger's opening response reflects the thin facade of U.S. activity in Laos.

Overt changeover over three years ago of PEO into MAAG seemed not to have greatly impressed communists. Since they are no doubt assuming U.S. already deeply involved in advising Lao and supervising delivery and use of MAP, surfacing of any advisory teams would only serve to put U.S. publicly on record as violating Geneva Accords.

Unger then continued with a frank and somber assessment of the Royal Lao armed forces.

MAAG and White Star teams did a highly commendable job under difficult circumstances, but their experience demonstrated that it is almost impossible to put any real spine into FAR. U.S. prestige was tarnished since one FAR disaster after another inevitably tended to rub off onto U.S. advisors. As stated many times before, do not believe we could ever make fighting force out of FAR such as able to withstand determined Viet Minh-backed PL drive. We should regard FAR as no more than tripwire, all while of course trying to strengthen it wherever possible by appropriate deliveries necessary MAP equipment, advice from ARMA and AIRA [U.S. Army and Air Force attaches], support by T-28's, etc.

Ambassador Unger ended his assessment "I recommend U.S. not unnecessarily involve itself in open violation Geneva Accords and that U.S. prestige not repeat not be publicly linked with such an inept and uninspired army as are the FAR/Neutralists today."⁵¹

Operation "Triangle"

In mid-July 1964 ten battalions of FAR/Neutralist troops launched an attack on Pathet Lao positions west of the Plain of Jars near the junction of Routes Seven and Thirteen. The campaign, code-named "Triangle," was conceived by the Lao government and designed to relieve pressure on neutralist forces located at Muong Soui on the Plain of Jars. The United States, responding to Prime Minister Souvanna's request, was heavily involved in "Triangle." Air America transports airlifted troops and supplies, U.S. jets and Thai-piloted T-28's flew reconnaissance and strike missions, and U.S. Forward Air Controllers (FACs) were brought into Laos to direct the air attacks. Air America T-28's, however, were specifically excluded from the operation.⁵² A State Department cable advised Ambassador Unger that the U.S. "public and third-country position would be that the operation is mercenary Air America and not US Government ... and relates directly to the defense of Neutralist forces."⁵³ "Triangle" continued for more than ten weeks and met with considerable success on the ground.⁵⁴ The intense communist anti-aircraft fire directed at the Lao, Thai, and U.S. pilots, however, took its toll.

Action Without Authority

On 14 August an RT-28 was forced down and an F-105 damaged.⁵⁵ Four days later the "roof fell in." A Thai-piloted RT-28 was shot down along with an Air America H-34 responding to the scene. Another T-28 flying to the area in

bad weather also crashed. Fortunately, three Air America T-28's and a number of U.S. Air Force F-100's and F-105's were able to provide cover fire while an Air America H-34 successfully rescued the wounded and badly burned American pilot. The Thai pilots were never recovered.⁵⁶

Notwithstanding this success, the point remains that in an immediate effort to rescue the downed flyers, Ambassador Unger had disobeyed State Department guidelines. Without prior Washington approval Unger had dispatched Thai and Air America T-28's with permission "to use napalm in effort rescue crew T-28 ... and any surviving members of helicopter with Air America crew."⁵⁷ Air America General Manager David Hickler, who was in the Air America operations center when Unger was briefed on the emergency, remembers that the ambassador was acutely aware his decision could have major ramifications for U.S. interests in Southeast Asia. According to Hickler:

The Ambassador listened attentively ... asking the proper questions, and was the center of a quiet but earnest crowd of about ten very concerned individuals. Finally, after a quiet moment of reflection, he said, "OK, let's go. Napalm if it must be but no, repeat no villages or houses are to be hit." Later the Ambassador individually briefed each pilot.

While awaiting developments Unger told Hickler that "he had acted without proper authorization ... [but] was well aware of our pilots' concern for a fellow pilot. But he also expressed his duties and obligations ... to abide by the Geneva accord." It was a very difficult time for Ambassador Unger, but he had not hesitated in making his decision.⁵⁸

In a "Flash" [highest priority] cable to the State Department Unger explained his action and recommended a cover story:

Regret need for immediate decision prevented me from obtaining prior authorization for use of AA pilots in FAR operation. If any AA piloted T-28 downed and captured we should if queried deny any T-28's piloted by Americans. Instead recommend our reply should state Americans were ... serving as crew members of helicopter that went to rescue Lao pilots of downed T-28.⁵⁹

The incident raised considerable concern in Washington. White House advisor McGeorge Bundy wrote President Johnson on 18 August that while Unger "was acting in an emergency situation, and it may well be that we have held him on too tight a guideline here ... a direct issue of action without authority does exist." Bundy further advised the president that the White House staff had already undertaken an "intense and immediate review" of the American T-28 program.⁶⁰

The same day Secretary of State Dean Rusk sent a personal "NODIS" [No distribution] message to Unger.⁶¹ In a 19 August "Eyes Only for the Secretary" response, Unger replied:

Eye fully appreciate and will be closely guided by your message. Situation at time Eye authorized use American pilots in my judgment did not permit of even brief delay entailed in exchange of Flash messages; However, Eye believe our procedures here can be tuned up to assure that we have more time for such decisions in future.⁶²

In a 19 August State Department message the American embassy in Vientiane was told "Yesterday's loss of two T-28's and AA helicopter, together with serious political and military risks involved in rescue operations, raises anew

questions of utility and risk factors involved in present ... T-28 strikes." Unger was asked to provide "suggestions as to how T-28 operations during weeks ahead could best be used so as to maintain above advantages while at same time minimizing possible calls upon U.S. planes and personnel."⁶³ Unger responded on 20 August, "I do not see much prospect of reducing calls on US planes and personnel for SAR [search and rescue] operations if we hope to exploit the advantages of our T-28 strike force in present military situation." The ambassador ended his cable, showing the strain and frustration of his duties in Vientiane, by saying:

we are deeply preoccupied with problem of control of military operations in this very difficult political and military situation and constantly attempt keep risks at minimum consistent with objectives which we have set for ourselves in Laos.⁶⁴

In a companion message Ambassador Unger requested greater authority in conducting search and rescue missions:

Believe Eye require advance authorization for use Air America pilots in T-28 SAR operations if they are to have reasonable chance of success. Eye am confident there would be sharp reduction of effectiveness all air operations if pilots were not persuaded we were prepared to take all reasonable measures to rescue them once they were down. Eye hope Department will grant me discretionary authority to use Air America pilots in T-28s for SAR operations when Eye consider this indispensable to success of operation and with understanding that whenever situation permitted Eye would seek specific authorization from Washington.⁶⁵

As revealed in the "Pentagon Papers," on 26 August Secretary Rusk agreed to Unger's request.⁶⁶

Despite flying hundreds of search and rescue support

missions and a handful of ground attack sorties over the next few years, the "A" Team suffered no casualties and just two lost aircraft.⁶⁷ Thus, to the vast relief of the U.S. government, the Communists were never able to prove the existence of this State Department/CIA "air force."⁶⁸

America's "Yankee Team" reconnaissance missions were primarily a reaction to the North Vietnamese penetration of South Vietnam. For the most part, the movement of communist soldiers and supplies across the Plain of Jars and south along the eastern Lao "corridor" threatened Saigon, not Vientiane. Washington's interest in Laos was now, therefore, merely an adjunct to the expanding war in South Vietnam.

From this point forward the United States would become involved in two distinct, yet interrelated wars in Laos. First, the aerial bombardment of supplies and men traversing Laos destined for South Vietnam. Secondly, and the primary focus of this study, a continuing American effort conducted mostly beyond the confines of the Geneva accords to protect the Royal Lao government against the North Vietnamese backed Pathet Lao. America's war in Laos would now move into the shadow of the much larger struggle for South Vietnam.

ENDNOTES FOR CHAPTER V

1. Matt J. Menger, In the Valley of the Mekong (Patterson, New Jersey: St. Anthony's Guild, 1970) 150. Father Menger was a Catholic priest who for many years worked with Laotian refugees.
2. Dommen, Conflict, 257. For a detailed discussion of North Vietnamese military support to the Pathet Lao see Langer and Zasloff, North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao, 106-22.
3. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 193-4, and Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 91.
4. Ibid.
5. Lee, China's Policy Toward Laos, 112.
6. During the Hanoi visit Souvanna's aide was confined to his room. Dommen, Conflict, 259.
7. Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 91, and Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 195.
8. Dommen, Conflict in Laos, 261.
9. My interview with Unger, 21 May 1989, and Dommen, Conflict, 267. See also Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 195-7.
10. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 195-7, and Porter, "After Geneva," 203-4. The committee doled out important staff positions and appointed regional commanders. According to Arthur Dommen, "From this time on, the commanders of Laos' five military regions acquired power and influence resembling in their absoluteness the power of ancient warlords; they

stayed on indefinitely in their fiefs, unless disgraced, and they refused to allow any of their troops to be transferred, even temporarily, to the command of another region, a fact that considerably hampered effective planning against the Pathet Lao." Dommen, Conflict, 267-8.

11. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 199.

12. The T-28's were replacements for the older T-6 trainers provided in early 1961 by the Eisenhower administration. Ibid., 193. The T-28 "Trojan" is a two-seat, propeller driven, single engine airplane. Two versions were sent to Laos, the reconnaissance RT-28 and the attack T-28D. Bowers, Tactical Airlift, 825.

13. Declassified Document Reference Service, 1981, document 205B, Research Publications Incorporated, Woodbridge, Connecticut. (Declassified Document Reference Service hereafter cited as DDRS). The American embassy in Vientiane retained the fuses for the T-28 ordnance, making it impossible for the Lao to conduct bombing operations without U.S. authority. Department of the Air Force. Oral History Interview. Colonel Robert L.F. Tyrrell, USAF. (Maxwell AFB, Alabama: 12 May 1975) 7-8. This precaution precluded the Lao Air Force from using the T-28's in any coup attempts.

14. Tyrrell, "AF Oral History," 5.

15. Department of Defense. "CINCPAC Command History, 1964," (Camp Smith, Hawaii: Office of the Command Historian, 1964) 285.

16. Talking Paper for Chief of Staff, U.S. Army, "Guidance for T-28 Aircraft Operations," 9 March 1964. (Document in my possession), William E. McShane, letter to the author, 26 August 1989. Mr. McShane was one of the original "Waterpump" pilots.

17. DDRS, 1990, document 248, DDRS, 1989, document 686, Tyrrell, "AF Oral History," 23, and 36-7, and Department of the Air Force. "Debriefing of LtCol Robert B. Melgard, Asst. Air Attache, Vientiane, Laos." Washington, D.C., 13 November 1964. (Document in my possession). Lieutenant Colonel Melgard was the first AOC commander in Savannakhet.

18. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 197-8.

19. Ibid., 201.

20. Tyrrell, "AF Oral History," 33-4, and Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 198. For details on the Thai/Lao T-28 bombing see DDRS, 1990, document 3311.

21. DDRS, 1990, document 324, and DDRS, 1989, document 3543.

22. As indicated earlier, Washington was obtaining high-level U-2 photography of Communist activities in Southeast Asia, but for diplomatic purposes and reasons of national security preferred a dependable source of low-level tactical photography.

23. DDRS, 1990, Document 3312.

24. DDRS, 1989, document 686.

25. U.S., Laos Hearings, 370.

26. DDRS, 1990, document 3312.

27. My interview with Unger, 21 May 1989.
28. DDRS, 1990, document 3312, and DDRS, 1989, document 686. The deleted portion appears to have been a reference to Thai involvement.
29. During the meeting there was no mention of compensation. Later, cash payments from the CIA to the pilots were received through the Air America General Manager, Roy Stitt, and the Air America T-28 Chief Pilot, Edward Eckholdt. Jenny recalls the pay as \$50 per mission. My interview with Jenny, 26 January 1990, and David H. Hickler, letter to the author, 8 March 1990. Hickler was a long time Civil Air Transport and Air America employee who in August 1964 became General Manager of the company's Vientiane office. He was administratively involved in some of the CIA cash payments.
30. DDRS, 1989, document 856. Although this cable mentions "Bird and Sons" all of the initial T-28 pilots were Air America employees.
31. DDRS, 1989, document 857.
32. DDRS, 1990, document 3044. Although the delivery point has been purged from this declassified document, it seems likely the aircraft were delivered by MACV to Vientiane.
33. My interview with Jenny, 26 January 1990.
34. DDRS, 1976, document 226A. William M. Leary relates that on the first day the Air America pilots were ordered to bomb a bridge on the northeastern corner of the Plain of Jars, but

missed. William M. Leary, letter to the author, 11 February 1991.

35. The U.S. Air Force Attache in Vientiane suspected that other "Waterpump" pilots were flying unauthorized strike missions. The pilots felt an obligation to their Thai and Lao students and wanted to lead them into combat. Tyrrell, "AF Oral History," 24.

36. My interview with David H. Hickler, Escondido, California, 15 June 1989.

37. Leary letter, 11 February 1991, and Tilford, Search and Rescue, 48-9. Klusmann escaped from the Pathet Lao on 29 August and made contact with friendly Hmong soldiers on 1 September. An Air America aircraft then transported Klusmann to Udorn, Thailand and safety. An official debriefing of Klusmann's ordeal is found in DDRS, 1989, documents 2343, and 2344.

38. Tilford, Search and Rescue, 49.

39. According to Thomas G. Jenny, who participated in the missions, the CIA was telling Ambassador Unger the T-28's were involved in search and rescue operations. My interview with Jenny, 26 January 1990.

40. Berger, USAF in Southeast Asia, 122.

41. DDRS, 1989, document 682.

42. Tilford, Search and Rescue, 51-2.

43. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 203. See also Langer, "The Soviet Union, China, and the Pathet Lao," 69.

44. Gravel, Pentagon Papers, V:268, and Lee, China's Policy Toward Laos, 116.
45. DDRS, 1989, document 2105.
46. Tyrrell, "AF Oral History," 49.
47. Lee, China's Policy Toward Laos, 119, and Langer, "The Soviet Union, China, and the Pathet Lao," 32.
48. U.S., Laos Hearings, 448-9.
49. Ibid., 412-3.
50. U.S., Laos Hearings, 372.
51. DDRS, 1989, document 2100.
52. U.S., Laos Hearings, 479, DDRS, 1990, document 1456, and DDRS, 1989, documents 2114, and 2115.
53. DDRS, 1989, document 2113.
54. U.S., Laos Hearings, 479. Tyrrell, "AF Oral History," 51-2. The Pathet Lao view of Operation "Triangle" is found in Phoukout Stronghold (n.p.: Neo Lao Haksat Publications, 1967) 6-9.
55. DDRS, 1990, document 684.
56. DDRS, 1990, document 1638, Air America Accident Board Investigation, 20 September 1964, Udorn Thailand, and Air America communication from David H. Hickler to Air America President, Taipei, Taiwan, 22 August 1964. (Documents in my possession). There is some confusion as to whether or not an Air America Filipino flight mechanic was killed in the H-34 crash. President Johnson was told on 18 August that "the pilot and crew ... were rescued." DDRS, 1990, document 1638.

This information was incorrect. Air Force historian Earl Tilford, who had access to a broad range of classified government documents, says a Filipino crewman was killed in the crash. It is instructive, however, that Tilford's account does not mention the use of Air America T-28's. Tilford, Search and Rescue, 52. William M. Leary has also determined the Filipino flight mechanic was killed. Leary letter, 11 February 1991.

57. DDRS, 1989, document 822.

58. Air America communication from Hickler to Air America President, 22 August 1964.

59. DDRS, 1989, document 822.

60. DDRS, 1990, document 1638.

61. The text of which is not available. A 20 August 1964 NSC memorandum to Bundy states "I understand that Mr. Rusk has had a NODIS exchange with Unger, the upshot of which is authorization only to use U.S. personnel on SAR helicopter operations unless Washington specifies otherwise in a response to a specific request." DDRS, 1990, document 1459.

62. DDRS, 1989, document 3403.

63. DDRS, 1989, document 823. This same cable was also released as DDRS, 1990, document 2637.

64. DDRS, 1990, document 3319.

65. DDRS, 1989, document 3404.

66. Gravel, Pentagon Papers, III:552. The U.S. government's awkward and often puzzling declassification policy is

demonstrated by comparing the text of this message in the Pentagon Papers and the same message as it appears in DDRS, 1989, document 3406. In the Pentagon Papers version Rusk states "[SAR efforts should not] discriminate between rescuing Americans, Thais and Lao." Also, "On the other side, we naturally recognize T-28 operations are vital both for their military and psychological effects in Laos and as a negotiating card in support of Souvanna's position." In the DDRS version both of these passages are deleted. The DDRS documents also, in many cases, have been purged to remove any references to Thai participation in the Laos war. These deletions, given the broad knowledge in Thailand and Laos of Thai-U.S. cooperation, is absurd.

67. My interview (by telephone) with William M. Leary, Athens, Georgia, 9 May 1988, and my interview with Hickler, 1 June 1989.

68. In the wake of his new authority to employ the Air America T-28's, Unger proposed the State Department upgrade his "air force" SAR capability by providing Air America with five of the U.S. Navy's heavily-armored A-1H "Skyraider" attack aircraft. DDRS, 1990, document 3320. Air America did not receive any A-1's, but a USAF Air Commando A-1E squadron would be deployed to Thailand in 1965 to support U.S. military and Air America rescue and special operations in Laos and Vietnam. See Tilford, Search and Rescue, 66.

CHAPTER VI

WILLIAM SULLIVAN'S WAR

Direction of this war effort was a tremendously absorbing and enervating task. I eventually carried in my head, just short of my subconscious, a working knowledge of our deployments, the terrain, the roads and trails, the enemy dispositions, and our aircraft availability. Many a night I ... had to decide whether to order the evacuation of an outpost under attack, to hold on, to reinforce, to call for air support, or to mount a diversionary action It was a far cry from the normal pursuits of the striped-pants set.¹ -- William H. Sullivan, U.S. Ambassador to Laos, 1964-69.

Charles Stevenson has, appropriately, called the conflict in Laos "William Sullivan's war."² Indeed, during his tenure in Laos Sullivan presided over a considerable air and ground campaign. More important, however, was Sullivan's ability to manage the conflict in such a way as to preserve the facade of American adherence to the Geneva agreements. For nearly five years he insured the concealment of American military aid to Laos and, thereby, provided Souvanna Phouma and the Soviet Union with the political "cover" necessary to ignore U.S. violations of the Geneva agreements.³

The Field Marshall

Considered brilliant by most and tyrannical by many, in November 1964 William H. Sullivan succeeded Leonard Unger as U.S. Ambassador to Laos.⁴ Sullivan, who had been Averell Harriman's principal deputy in Geneva, was especially well informed regarding U.S. foreign policy objectives in Southeast

Asia. He was also completely comfortable with the power invested in him by the May 1961 "Kennedy Letter." When questioned about this authority by a U.S. Senate Committee in 1969 Sullivan said:

This letter provides the Ambassador with Presidential authority to direct the actions of the various representatives of the agencies present in his mission and requires coordination by them with him in the execution of their functions. Laos [has] no organic [U.S.] military command present and functioning on Lao soil ... many functions that would ordinarily in a circumstance such as we face in Laos [would] be a direct responsibility of the military chain of command. By virtue of the 1962 agreements and by virtue of the circumstances prevailing in Laos, these are matters that fall within the province of the Ambassador and of his policy directions.⁵

According to former CIA official Douglas Blaufarb, Sullivan's specific authority was required for all U.S. activities originating in Laos, some Lao military operations, and for air and ground actions which, although planned elsewhere, would occur inside the country. This power included the:

Permanent and temporary assignment in Laos of all personnel concerned with military activity. Budget requests for MAP. Ground rules governing movements of U.S. advisory personnel within Laos. Requests for augmentation or improvement or any change in existing military equipment for regular Lao units. Construction of U.S. military facilities. Sizable movements of Lao military ... by U.S.-controlled aircraft. Offensive operations by Lao forces requiring close air support or preliminary air attack or any special logistical support. Lao force levels, including regular and irregular forces, or any changes in them. [Foreign] training for Lao personnel. Construction of FAR or RLAF facilities. Advance approval of preplanned [U.S.] air attacks against targets in Laos. Approval of rules of engagement and ground rules for other types of

[U.S.] activity.⁶

Sullivan's authority in Laos was well known to U.S. military officials from Southeast Asia to Washington. Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, CINCPAC from 1964-68, recalls excellent relations with Sullivan, even though the ambassador would often bypass CINCPAC and communicate directly with the JCS. "Sullivan had presidential authority in Laos and that was OK with me. I was convinced the fight was in Vietnam."⁷

This view of Sullivan's role was not shared by General William C. Westmoreland, Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV). "Sullivan was often involved in purely military matters ... but the key to the matter was Washington's interpretation of the Geneva Agreements of 1962. Sullivan had marching orders from the White House and made no secret of his clout."⁸ Sullivan later remarked:

By the time I went to Laos as Ambassador, I had been working here [Washington] very closely with Mac Bundy, Bob McNamara, Bus Wheeler, and John McCone, and all the other bosses of the individual members of the team out there, all of whom I could get in touch with directly.⁹

As a result, although Westmoreland chafed at the ambassador's involvement in COMUSMACV's Laotian operations, Sullivan's authority over U.S. military activity in Laos went largely unquestioned.¹⁰ Admiral Sharp and General Westmoreland were soon referring to Sullivan as the "Field Marshall."¹¹

These myriad responsibilities, as well as the performance of normal diplomatic functions, called for innovative embassy management techniques. Ambassador Sullivan continued Leonard

Unger's policy of a daily staff meeting but began the practice, "unprecedented in the Foreign Service," of attending the gathering. In Sullivan's words:

I [took] steps as Ambassador there to have a daily meeting with all the chiefs of various elements of the mission, all of the representatives of the other agencies, to make sure not only that I was informed of all their problems and interests and intentions, but that there was cross-fertilization [between the elements and agencies]. In this way there was no excuse for anyone being out of step through ignorance of the facts.¹²

It was during these meetings and in private sessions with the CIA Station Chief and the embassy's military attaches that Sullivan shaped and administered his multifaceted war.

The Vang Pao Army

In early 1962 the CIA and Vang Pao established two large bases for what was now commonly called L'Armee Clandestine: Long Tieng, the new Military Region Two (MR II) headquarters for the "secret army," and Sam Thong, a USAID-operated hill tribe refugee center and, effectively, the civil headquarters for the Hmong. Both complexes were located a few miles southwest of the Plain of Jars and possessed modern communications equipment, medical facilities, and all-weather, laterite-surfaced airfields. Supported by CIA and U.S. military advisors who seemed to possess an unlimited supply of airplanes, equipment and supplies, and confident of USAID-administered care for those Hmong displaced by the fighting, Vang Pao pressed his guerilla war against the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao.¹³

By 1964 L'Armee Clandestine had taken a form and strategic posture which would remain largely unchanged for the next five years. Vang Pao had reorganized his army:

culling out older men and the physically unfit, and creating out of the remainder two categories of units, regional platoons and companies assigned local tasks, and a species of strike force called a Special Guerilla Unit, or SGU. The SGU's were directly under Vang Pao's headquarters and were used for major offensive or defensive purposes. In time they numbered over ten thousand out of a total irregular force of about thirty thousand.¹⁴

Vang Pao and his advisors concentrated on simple, weather-driven tactics. During the June to October rainy season the SGU's could be transported by U.S. military and/or U.S. contracted aircraft into communist controlled areas where they could harass enemy positions and supply lines. The North Vietnamese/Pathet Lao forces, which had become "road-bound ... dependent upon wheeled vehicles to move their heavy weapons and to bring up their rice and ammunition" were forced to remain in defensive posts until the weather cleared. Thus, the war in northeastern Laos took on a seasonal routine where the Hmong scored military gains during the rainy months and then retreated in the face of communist dry season offensives.¹⁵

During early 1964, for example, the North Vietnamese deployed an estimated four battalions (twelve hundred men) to the area of Nong Het, located near the Lao-Vietnamese border, to counter Hmong guerilla operations. The Hmong, practicing good tactics, avoided contact with the numerically superior

enemy. Then, on 25 February, the Vietnamese launched a massive artillery and mortar barrage against the Hmong stronghold at Phou Khe, a seven thousand-foot high mountain located southwest of the Plain of Jars. In a fifteen hour battle the communists were able to capture the base and disperse the Hmong defenders.¹⁶

On 19 February 1966, a combined Pathet Lao/North Vietnamese force staged an intensive attack on Na Khang, also known as Lima Site 36. Na Khang, located northeast of the Plain of Jars, was an important forward operating area and served as the CIA "sector" headquarters. It was also a base from which U.S. search and rescue helicopters could be dispatched to pick up downed pilots in Laos and North Vietnam.

During the engagement Vang Pao arrived by helicopter at a small village near Na Khang. As the general was stepping from the aircraft he was shot in the right arm and chest.¹⁷ Vang Pao was immediately evacuated to Korat, Thailand for treatment at a U.S. Air Force hospital. Although Vang Pao was not critically wounded, the Pathet Lao immediately began to propagandize the Hmong leader's death. One American reported that a "pall fell over the Hmong upon hearing the news." A tape recording was soon made with Vang Pao refuting his demise in Hmong, Lao, and French. The tape was played for three days over a government radio station and convinced the Hmong field units of Vang Pao's survival. Vang Pao was later flown to Tripler Army Medical Center in Honolulu, Hawaii for further

medical treatment and a short vacation.¹⁸

When the general returned to Laos he ordered Battalion 201, the Hmong unit operating closest to him at Na Khang, to assemble at Long Tieng. Apparently Vang Pao, upon checking with his unit commanders, had been told that evidence suggested that it was not a communist soldier who shot the general. The entire unit was asked to drink a "special water" which, according to Hmong beliefs, would kill anyone who did not possess a "true heart."¹⁹

This incident accurately reflects Vang Pao's "two worlds." On one hand the general could call upon the full range of advanced American weaponry and material support. Nevertheless, Vang Pao and his people remained quite superstitious and, in a Western sense, wholly unsophisticated. While Vang Pao was hospitalized in Thailand Ambassador Sullivan intervened personally to convince the general to have a steel pin placed in his arm. The general agreed to the operation only after the ambassador explained that "the steel would eventually melt as it was warmed by the body, and would eventually depart from the system just like bad spirits."²⁰ This spirit belief, what the Hmong call Tlan, calls into question Vang Pao's full understanding of modern military technology. Vang Pao was unquestionably a brave and charismatic guerilla leader.²¹ There seems little basis, however, for Ambassador Sullivan's claim that Vang Pao was "a military genius," who planned and controlled the war in

northeastern Laos.²² The Hmong general provided tremendous inspiration to his people. But, as the war progressed and involved greater levels of modern technology, it was CIA and U.S. military expertise which planned and directed (with the ambassador's approval) the secret war in Laos.

Watching the Enemy

Because aerial reconnaissance alone was insufficient to determine the full extent of enemy operations, Hmong and Thai PARU also engaged in "Road Watch" (RWT) and commando operations along the border and inside North Vietnam. These teams became essential to intelligence collection and to what William Colby has termed "the perfect marriage of the guerilla and the airplane."²³ According to a USAF pilot who worked with the Vang Pao army:

The Road Watch teams ... were well trained, used their binoculars, counted trucks, counted troops, determined where they were moving, and got hard intelligence. They were effective. The difficult thing about Road Watch teams was trying to recruit because the mortality rate was pretty high. It wasn't so difficult inserting them; you could take them in by chopper and put them down fairly near the target area and have them go in over the ground. But then getting them out [was often very difficult].²⁴

A typical RWT mission is described in a 17 December 1966, USAF air tasking order, "[Road Watch team] now being readied for 5 day operation with observation post ... overlooking Route 912. Position ... presents very good vantage point ... segment contains numerous truck parks ... supporting considerable vehicular and foot traffic."²⁵ The Road Watch

teams were routinely flown into enemy territory aboard USAF CH-3, and later CH-53, "Jolly Green" helicopters. These missions, designated "Pony Express," were often augmented by Air America H-34's and supported by USAF ground attack aircraft.²⁶

RWT observations were reported in a variety of ways. Still and movie cameras were used by some of the teams to provide intelligence officials with photography of enemy activity. The CIA also provided the RWTs with picture cards showing communist vehicles and weapons. Each piece of equipment was assigned a code name, thereby allowing the infiltrators to radio simple messages to circling aircraft and intelligence centers in Laos and Thailand.²⁷ More common, after 1967, were "counting devices" which allowed the RWT "to press picture-coded keys as many times as they saw a particular piece of equipment pass by on the trail. This information would then be gathered by an orbiting aircraft."²⁸ Theodore Shackley, CIA Station Chief in Laos during Ambassador Sullivan's tenure, says that lightweight communications beepers were sometimes implanted in the stocks of assault rifles provided to Hmong agents. This allowed the CIA to track the locations of their operatives.²⁹

Commando operations inside North Vietnam and along the border included tapping Vietnamese telephone lines and ambushing and destroying enemy trucks, ammunition, and fuel supplies. One of the most daring, and least effective,

commando actions occurred in July 1970 when a team of twenty-two Hmong raiders infiltrated North Vietnam. Their mission was to attack the town of Hoa Binh, an important logistical point located half-way between Hanoi and the Vietnamese-Lao border. The Hmong succeeded in firing eight mortar rounds at a supply depot before being detected by Vietnamese soldiers with tracking dogs. In a prolonged fire-fight twenty-one of the commandos were killed, while the lone survivor was captured and imprisoned.³⁰

Refugee Relief

This alternating, offensive/defensive war had a tragic effect on the Laotian hill tribes and their traditional mountain lifestyles. In addition to the misery over their dead and wounded, the tribesmen were buffeted constantly by the maneuvering Vang Pao and communist forces. Villagers were unable to plant and harvest crops, tend their livestock, or take any other actions other than those required for their day-to-day existence. Refugee assistance, therefore, became a very important component of U.S. military assistance to the Royal Lao government. As one U.S. military officer who served with the Hmong has said, "The Hmong cast their lot with us. We said that we would take care of them."³¹

USAID, by presidential decision, was given responsibility for refugee care. In April 1972 a senior USAID official stated:

The AID organization in Laos has been providing the

care and feeding as well as health services for many tens of thousands of refugees for more than 10 years. Some of these refugees are the dependents of paramilitary forces who have long since been forced out of their native hills by the North Vietnamese Army. Some of the sick and wounded are paramilitary soldiers Some are civilians: men, women, and children unconnected with the armed forces.³²

The Sam Thong-based USAID refugee headquarters was the nerve center for these services and the coordination of daily movements of people and supplies throughout northeastern Laos. Heading the USAID effort was Edgar "Pop" Buell, a retired Indiana farmer who first came to Laos in 1960 as a volunteer with the pacifist International Voluntary Services (IVS) organization.³³ Buell was a profane, hard-working, widower who dedicated his life to the Hmong. In turn, he was revered by the highlanders and praised by all elements of the American Mission in Laos.³⁴

Using Air America and the other civilian air carriers, Buell provided the dislocated tribes people with food, building materials, and medical attention. Sam Thong and Long Tieng rapidly grew into large, bustling towns, populated by refugees and the families of Vang Pao's soldiers. USAID workers at Sam Thong also monitored the needs of those who remained in the mountains. Contract aircraft constantly delivered supplies to remote mountaintops and valleys, as well as providing a tribal shuttle service to the markets of Long Tieng and Sam Thong.³⁵

Bookkeeping

The tempo of Vang Pao's military operations and the associated refugee support programs required hundreds of contractor airlift sorties per week. Helicopter and fixed wing crews maintained a busy, mostly daytime, pace of refugee assistance, troop movements, and unit resupply.³⁶ These intertwined military and refugee support activities posed unique scheduling and accountability problems.

Although the civilian air carriers in Laos operated under separate USAID, CIA, and USAID/RO (DOD) contracts, aircraft crews often performed work where the contracts were "mixed." It was not unusual for a single pilot to fly a variety of missions, both military and civilian related, over the course of a day. For example, morning duty at a "Lima Site" could involve the movement of food supplies, while afternoon tasking might entail the movement of FAR or SGU troops.

This complex system was managed by an "Air Support Branch" (ASB) within the USAID/RO. The ASB, in close coordination with the contract air carriers and the "customers", would publish at Udorn and Vientiane a daily "Flight Operations Schedule." However, with the aircraft often operating at the direction of on-scene USAID, CIA, and USAID/RO officials, success was largely dependent upon responsive and flexible air crews.³⁷

"Secret war" notwithstanding, U.S. and contractor regulations required strict accountability for every aircraft

sortie. Pilots-in-command were responsible for recording the actual flying hours devoted to each contract, and these flight logs were submitted to company supervisors. The record, then became the basis for U.S. government compensation to the contractors.³⁸ U.S. Congressional inquiries into the mixing of these contracts, and the appropriateness of USAID's involvement in military related activity, would eventually result in revised accounting procedures. These changes will be discussed in the following chapter.

The Military Aid Pipeline

The United States employed two clandestine logistical systems to channel military aid into Laos; one (Department of Defense) directed at the Lao military regulars and the other (CIA) designed to support the Laotian paramilitary forces. DEPCHIEF and the USAID/RO, designed to side-step the Geneva accords, acted in the place of the prohibited U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group.

[DEPCHIEF] wrote the programs, established the training arrangements, and provided technical assistance. USAID/RO worked with the Ambassador, the Attaches, and the RLG [Royal Lao Government] General Staff and forces in determining support requirements. To a very limited extent USAID/RO personnel performed advisory functions in field units. USAID/RO did little monitoring of MAP material use and maintenance.³⁹

The CIA operation, of which little information has been de-classified, was managed and directed by the agency from its 4802d Joint Liaison Detachment (JLD) at Udorn, Thailand. Unlike the DOD system, where most of the Laos destined

materiel was delivered by merchant ships to Thai ports and then trucked up to the border and transported across the Mekong river, all CIA supplies were air-shipped from Udorn into Laos.⁴⁰

The CIA program, by its very nature, operated with limited bureaucratic oversight. On the other hand, the DEPCHIEF-administered Military Assistance Program (MAP) program was subject to strict guidelines. Nevertheless, the limited ability of Requirements Office personnel to inspect the Lao operation and maintenance of U.S. supplied military equipment invited corruption and misuse of the materiel. While the United States was determined to minimize violations of the Geneva agreements, it became clear that the military aid program required the presence of additional U.S. military personnel.

Project 404

In 1966, the Department of Defense began Project 404, a covert augmentation of DEPCHIEF and the U.S. military attaches in Laos. Under the program about 120 U.S. Air Force and Army personnel and some five civilians were administratively assigned to DEPCHIEF in Thailand but served in Laos.

The functions of the augmentation group were primarily operationally oriented. Included were [radio] communicators, intelligence, and operation specialists in about a 70/30 army/air force mix. They were stationed at RLAF bases and Army Military Region Headquarters to advise, assist in the targeting effort, and to effect coordination of regional air support requirements.⁴¹

Project 404 improved substantially the U.S. military aid program to Laos. For the first time, DEPCHIEF and the U.S. attaches in Laos had active duty U.S. military personnel submitting regular status reports on the condition of U.S. supplied materiel and the performance of the Lao military. This feedback was essential to the proper management of the aid program and allowed planners more effectively to determine future Lao military needs.⁴²

Apart from placing additional active duty military personnel in the kingdom, Project 404 also signalled an important change in the U.S. military's involvement in the Laotian war. Although many acted as legitimate trainers for the Lao, a good number of the "404" personnel assumed technical duties related to the burgeoning Southeast Asian air war. In particular, the men filled an important need for skilled coordination between the Lao Air Operations Centers (AOCs) and Laotian and American military aircraft.

The Ravens

Similarly, faced with a lack of qualified indigenous air controllers, the United States in late 1966 began to station in Laos nearly two dozen USAF Forward Air Controllers (FACs), nicknamed "Ravens." Apparently this was a unilateral decision; according to 1969 Congressional testimony, "The RLG did not ask for FACs per se; however, in the RLG request for US assistance, the Country team determined they were necessary to provide proper control for air operations."⁴³

The Ravens, all volunteers with previous FAC experience in Vietnam, were given six month temporary duty (TDY) orders and administratively assigned to the "Waterpump" detachment at Udorn, Thailand. In practice, the men lived and worked at one of the five Lao Air Operations Centers (Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Long Tieng, Savannakhet, and Pakse). The group wore civilian clothes, carried USAID identification cards, flew Royal Lao Air Force O-1, U-17, and T-28 aircraft, and operated under the direction of the American ambassador in Vientiane.⁴⁴ Flying with English-speaking indigenous observers and Forward Air Guides (FAGs) who possessed the authority under the Lao "rules of engagement" to validate targets, the Ravens provided indispensable targeting assistance for American and Laotian aircraft.⁴⁵

Not surprisingly, Long Tieng was one of the busiest and most demanding FAC assignments in Laos. Nearly a dozen Ravens flew in support of Vang Pao's operations and the elite pilots meshed well with the Hmong irregulars and their CIA case officers. For many of the Ravens, however, the assignment at Long Tieng was bittersweet. Isolation from the regular U.S. Air Force, combined with a feeling that their highly dangerous work was unappreciated by senior American military officers, produced dissension and morale problems. One outspoken Raven told an Air Force interviewer:

We felt our duty was to Vang Pao and CIA, and the Air Force came in way last. The Air Force paid us, and that was about all they did. We got no support from Vientiane ... [or higher headquarters]. Our

loyalties lay with Vang Pao and the CIA.⁴⁶

The Raven perception of their Vientiane and Thailand-bound leaders was well known within the U.S. embassy in Laos. Nonetheless, the Ravens performed a critical function and their superiors mostly ignored the irreverent behavior. It was, after all, U.S. policy which required the FACs to operate as "civilians" outside of normal military control. A certain degree of independence and grousing was accepted. Thus, Colonel Tyrrell, a long term Air Attache in Laos, praised the Ravens as "a great bunch ... a few oddballs along the line, but for the most part ... they did a fantastic job."⁴⁷

The Raven program in Laos was viewed quite differently by a number of senior U.S. Air Force officers. Major General James F. Kirkendall, who served as a senior air force commander in Vietnam and Thailand, recognized the importance of the Raven FACs. But General Kirkendall believed that some of the Ravens exhibited a contempt for authority which extended to their flying. "This kind of thing is human nature but I can only regretfully note that their lack of discipline both in the air and on the ground resulted in the unnecessary deaths of far too many of these fine young men."⁴⁸

General Kirkendall's comments also reflected a larger U.S. military concern that the American embassy in Vientiane was improperly employing air power in Laos.

Bombing in Earnest

The decision to place American FACs in Laos underscored

a growing U.S. determination to use aerial bombing against North Vietnam and communist forces infiltrating into South Vietnam.* Professor George Herring has observed:

By the end of November [1964], [President] Johnson's senior advisors had formulated concrete proposals for the use of American air power in Vietnam. The first phase, to last roughly a month, consisted of limited bombing raids against infiltration routes in Laos ... [and] reprisal strikes against North Vietnamese targets. Phase two, a large-scale air offensive, lasting from two to six months, ... [would] be followed, if necessary, by a naval blockade of North Vietnam.⁴⁹

On 8 December 1964 Ambassador Sullivan received a joint State-Defense Department message "to seek approval for American airstrikes on hostile communications in Laos."⁵⁰ In a 10 December response Sullivan advised Washington that the prime minister was ready to "cooperate in full measure with our proposals." Still, Souvanna Phouma was opposed to any public acknowledgements of the attacks, by either the Lao or the U.S governments. Sullivan reported:

He [Souvanna] fully supports the US program of pressures against North Vietnam and believes they should be carried out with deliberate "Sang-Froid [coolness]." He reviewed his familiar contention that actions speak louder than words and believes we should ... let the actions speak for themselves.⁵¹

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara quickly authorized the air attacks and on 14 December four U.S. Air Force F-105

* As defined at the outset, this study does not include a lengthy review of the important post-1964 U.S. air campaigns in Laos. These operations will, as appropriate, be mentioned in the course of discussing the military authority of the U.S. Ambassador to Laos and in situations where the bombing involved directly the Royal Lao military.

jets, accompanied by eleven reconnaissance and combat air patrol aircraft, struck at a bridge near the town of Nape in eastern Laos. A navigational error caused the F-105's to miss their target, but the bombing of eastern Laos, called "Barrel Roll," was under way.⁵² Additional U.S. bombing programs in southern Laos, code-named "Steel Tiger" and "Tiger Hound," began, respectively, in April and December of 1965.⁵³

Managing the Air War in Laos

Ambassador Sullivan possessed considerable faith in his own military judgments and rarely sought counsel outside his embassy. Sullivan has written, "Washington gave me a free hand to run it as best I could without interference. I can remember only two direct military instructions that I received in the four-and-a-half years in Laos."⁵⁴ When Sullivan did require military advice it came from the CIA Chief of Station and the U.S. military attaches. In the particular case of air power, Colonel Robert Tyrrell has said:

I report to the Ambassador proposals for air strikes that come to us from the Laotian military forces and the American military commands and in turn, I submit to U.S. commands the requirements for airstrikes approved by the Ambassador, which supplements the RLAF [Royal Lao Air Force] capability.⁵⁵

This procedure caused a great deal of resentment within U.S. military circles in Udorn and Saigon. Aside from the galling presumption that a diplomat knew more about targeting than trained airmen, the presence of Road Watch teams often prevented COMUSMACV from striking areas along communist

infiltration routes in southern Laos.⁵⁶

Also, under this system, an embassy-based air force colonel was acting in the place of a senior air commander. U.S. Air Force general officers in Thailand and South Vietnam had no choice but to endure a situation where their planes were being ordered into battle by a military subordinate. Moreover, air force officers in Udorn and Saigon widely believed that the CIA Station Chief in Laos was actually the ambassador's primary military advisor and the attache merely carried out the instructions of the CIA, as approved by the ambassador.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, because of the Kennedy letter's authority and the attache's chain of command, the U.S. military had little recourse but to accept Sullivan's decisions. The ambassador wrote the attache's efficiency report and sent it directly on to Washington. Therefore, what the generals at Udorn and Saigon thought of the attache was far less important than what the ambassador observed in the embassy.

As discussed above, Ambassador Sullivan's authority created unique command and control problems for the U.S. military and, in particular, the U.S. Air Force. In response to the peculiar situation in Laos, and the growing presence of U.S. aircraft and airmen in Thailand, the Department of Defense decided in November 1965 to establish a new air headquarters at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB). This new command, initially called Deputy Commander, 2d Air

Division/Thirteenth Air Force, was re-designated in April 1966 as Deputy Commander, 7th/13th Air Force (7/13th AF). The Air Force Major General in charge of 7/13th AF had greatly varied responsibilities.

He reported to the American ambassadors in Thailand and Laos on military matters in their respective areas; to the Commander, Thirteenth Air Force [located in the Philippines] for administrative and logistic matters involving USAF units in Thailand; and to the Commander, Second Air Division [later Seventh Air Force] in Saigon for the combat operations of those units.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, Ambassador Sullivan looked to the general at 7/13th AF and COMUSMACV for support, not advice. The first Deputy Commander, 7/13th AF has said, "In spite of my key position in the command chain ... I was not privy to all that went on. About the only time I really got in the "know" was on those occasions when they [CIA] got in a bind with the enemy."⁵⁹ His successor reports that "Deputy Commander 7th/13th was primarily a political position rather than an active participant in the conflict."⁶⁰

Thus, even though the air war in Laos and Vietnam had become increasingly complex (the very reason 7/13th AF was established), Sullivan relegated the general and his staff officers at Udorn to the status of clerks hired to carry out his airpower decisions. This procedure extended throughout Sullivan's tour in Vientiane and into the term of his successor, G. McMurtrie Godley.

By 1971 the unconventional system had bred considerable frustration at 7/13th AF headquarters. Major General Andrew

J. Evans, Jr., Deputy Commander, 7/13th AF expressed concern and a lack of optimism in his Air Force End-of-Tour report.

Although the overwhelming experience and expertise in military air operations lies in the staffs of 7/13AF and 7AF Headquarters, there are no checks on the Air Attache except those which can be exercised by the Deputy Commander 7/13AF through his personal relationship with the U.S. Ambassador. As long as the U.S. Ambassador has overall responsibility for military actions in Laos there seems little likelihood that significant improvements can be made.⁶¹

Military Assistance Group in Exile

DEPCHIEF was the Department of Defense organization which, because of the extraordinary political situation which existed in Laos, came under the scrutiny and demands of the U.S. ambassador to Laos. Headquartered in Bangkok to avoid an outright violation of the Geneva accords, the organization was, nevertheless, intended as a Military Assistance Advisory Group for Laos -- "intended," because under Ambassador Sullivan's leadership DEPCHIEF was only a Military Assistance Group (MAG). To reiterate, military supplies and equipment provided to the Royal Lao military were delivered through the cooperative efforts of DEPCHIEF and the USAID Requirements Office. But, like his relationship with the air force commander at Udorn, Sullivan desired no military counsel from the U.S. Army officer who commanded DEPCHIEF. Further, the USAID/RO and the Project 404 augmentees were the only U.S. "advisory" personnel allowed in Laos. In the eyes of the ambassador, DEPCHIEF's role was to "supply rice and bullets."

There was no "Advisory" function within this "exiled" Military Assistance Advisory Group.⁶²

Once again, presidential authority permitted Ambassador Sullivan to manage a U.S. military organization. The DEPCHIEF commander, who in any normal MAAG position would have been required to oversee the ordering, delivery, and use of all U.S. supplied military materials, was kept at arms length in Thailand. Called to testify before a U.S. Congressional Committee in 1969, DEPCHIEF commander Colonel Peter T. Russell explained:

I am a nonresident member of the U.S. country team in Vientiane. Deputy Chief performs the normal MAP functions of programming, arranging for training in the United States and elsewhere and for technical assistance. Unlike other MAAG's, Deputy Chief receives all requests and calls for support, services, and training through the Requirements Office of USAID Laos. My authority ends on the Thai side of the Mekong. We have no functions in Laos proper.⁶³

Occasionally DEPCHIEF personnel would travel to Vientiane for meetings, but "much to their chagrin ... [they] were always viewed as outsiders."⁶⁴

When Ambassador Sullivan was asked directly about the limited role of DEPCHIEF in Laos he responded:

I would say that, in the beginning, it was a meticulous respect for the Accords that dictated the distance between Vientiane and Udorn [and Bangkok]. The arrangements set in place by Ambassador Unger were, as a consequence, still in position during my 4 1/2 year tenure.⁶⁵

Ambassador Sullivan is much too modest. He was intimately involved in all facets of the war in Laos and, as Assistant

Secretary of State William Bundy has said, "There wasn't a bag of rice dropped in Laos that he [Sullivan] didn't know about."⁶⁶ Ambassador Sullivan was a man with a mission: strict U.S. adherence to the Geneva accords when possible and total secrecy when violations were necessary for the defense of Laos and the furtherance of America's Southeast Asian policy. Excluding large numbers of U.S. military personnel, and particularly senior officers, was an important part of the ambassador's strategy. No one should doubt that William Sullivan fashioned American policy in Laos. He was a very self-assured leader and it is disingenuous for him to suggest he merely followed the practice of his predecessor.

By the time Ambassador Sullivan arrived in Laos CINCPAC had reduced the DEPCHIEF command position from major general to colonel. The position continued to be filled by U.S. Army colonels until upgraded to the rank of brigadier general in February 1972.⁶⁷ Again, the political and military reasons for this rank structure, and why it was ultimately changed, will be reviewed in the following chapter.

The Primitive War

In line with his close control of DEPCHIEF and air operations, Ambassador Sullivan paid close attention to the ground war in Laos. Sullivan felt the CIA and the USAID Requirements Office were handling the land campaign quite well by themselves. He relates:

Our ground activity was really quite primitive and

consisted of an "ebb and flow" operation, responsive to the monsoon and the actions of the DRV [North Vietnam]. The tactics in that repetitive strategy were actually managed by ... General Vang Pao. We did, of course, add certain refinements such as helicopter airlift; but they were never on such a level that our CAS [CIA] and RO guys were over their heads. Moreover, much of what we did was "seat-of-the-pants" stuff in which nobody had accumulated much experience. Therefore, on balance, our people were probably as well - or better qualified - than the DEPCHIEF group for the things they did.⁶⁸

Ambassador Sullivan's contention, that DEPCHIEF assistance was unnecessary due to the limited sophistication of Vang Pao's ground operations and the experience of CIA and RO personnel, can only be justified during the early stages of the ground war. When the CIA began to support Vang Pao's SGU movements with large numbers of helicopters and fixed wing aircraft, the war had progressed well beyond a "seat-of-the-pants" operation. And, military records contradict Sullivan's recollection that there were no "complex military campaigns ... except for air operations" during his tenure in Laos.⁶⁹

The "helicopter airlift" referred to by the ambassador included U.S. Air Force "Pony Express" infiltration and ex-filtration missions. As discussed above, "Pony Express" was in full operation during Ambassador Sullivan's term in Vientiane. "Operation Duck," conducted in March 1969, is an excellent example of a Sullivan-approved, highly complicated air/ground mission.⁷⁰ According to a 7/13th AF report on "Operation Duck" the following forces and aircraft were committed in this SGU attack against an enemy cave complex:

Two SGU companies (115 men each Co) assault force.

USAF fraged [directed] resources included: seven CH-3's three UH-1's plus eight (Air America) H-34's for airlift of SGU companies, six A-1E's for escort of helicopters, two O-2's for FAC, eight F-105's and four A-1E's to kill and disperse enemy between HLZ [helicopter landing zone] and objective caves.⁷¹

"Operation Duck" was only one of many CIA planned and directed air/ground operations conducted during Ambassador Sullivan's tour in Vientiane. Considering the number of U.S. aircraft involved, and the amount of coordination and expertise required for the success of missions like "Operation Duck," William Sullivan's war cannot be described as "primitive."

The Loss of Phu Pha Thi

Through 1967 and into 1968 Hmong military units continued their harassment of communist forces. During this period attack missions by U.S. aircraft against targets in North Vietnam and Laos were increased substantially. In 1967 and 1968 U.S. fighter-bomber and bomber aircraft reportedly dropped in Laos more than 350,000 tons of bombs. This compared with approximately 500,000 tons of ordnance released during the same time period on targets in North Vietnam.⁷²

The efficient bombing of North Vietnam and Laos depended partially upon a Hmong-defended, U.S. outpost located on the ridge of a 5,800-foot high mountain in northeastern Laos. The ever-changing weather conditions in Southeast Asia posed serious navigational problems for American pilots. In 1966 the United States responded by establishing a Tactical Air

Navigation System (TACAN) at Phu Pha Thi,⁷³ also known as Lima Site 85. The TACAN was thereafter referred to as "Channel 97." More importantly, in mid-1967, the United States installed a TSQ 81 radar bomb facility at Pha Thi.⁷⁴

Located less than twenty miles from the North Vietnamese border and only 160 miles from Hanoi, Pha Thi was an ideal location for the radar system. Regardless of weather conditions, U.S. Air Force and Filipino contract technicians could safely guide strike aircraft to targets within sixty miles of Hanoi. The code name for this operation was "Commando Club."⁷⁵ Pha Thi was also used by the CIA as a staging area for commando missions and as a refueling station for U.S. Air Force rescue helicopters.⁷⁶

Phu Pha Thi became a tempting target for the North Vietnamese and on 12 January 1968, in an air action unprecedented during the Vietnam war, two Soviet-built AN-2 biplanes attacked the site. Air America helicopter pilot Captain Theodore H. Moore, who was flying artillery ammunition to Pha Thi, has recalled:

On 11 January 1968 a MIG [Soviet-built jet aircraft] flew over Site 85 and I presume took photographs. The next day it looked like World War I as I witnessed two biplanes attempting to destroy the electronic gear at Site 85. One of the airplanes dropped explosives and the other, which appeared to carry rockets and machine guns, fired at the site.⁷⁷

The radar equipment was not damaged but two soldiers and two female civilians were killed and two soldiers wounded.⁷⁸

Captain Moore, flying a UH-1 helicopter, chased the two

communist aircraft while his flight engineer, Glenn Woods, began firing an AK-47 rifle at the fleeing airplanes. Woods' gunfire caused one of the AN-2's to crash and burn, while the other biplane flew underneath the helicopter and crashed into the side of a mountain.⁷⁹ According to an official Air Force report a Hmong patrol found three bodies, believed to be Vietnamese, in the wreckage of one of the aircraft.

Investigations at the site and of the aircraft wreckage by a 7AF Intelligence team revealed that 120 mm mortar rounds had been converted to "bombs." Dropped through tubes in the floor of the AN-2, the "bombs" became armed in the slip stream and detonated on impact. The rockets were 57 mm, and were carried in rocket pods under the wing of the AN-2.⁸⁰

Immediately following the episode Air America fired Captain Moore for "causing an international incident." However, after being lauded during a debriefing in Vientiane by "ten to twelve" CIA agents, Moore received agency support and was rehired. He was, however, reassigned to southern Laos.⁸¹

The North Vietnamese did not give up their attempt to destroy the radar at Pha Thi. The security of Pha Thi was maintained by a Hmong military unit at the base of the mountain that controlled the only path to the top. The other accessible routes to the radar site were seeded with anti-personnel mines. One hundred Hmong and two hundred Thai PARU were stationed at the site itself. Additionally, the CIA and Air Force technicians had radio communications which enabled them to summon rescue helicopters and direct air strikes on

any approaching enemy forces.

On 11 March 1968 the radar complex came under a combined artillery and ground attack. North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao soldiers, using for the first time light-weight mine detectors, successfully climbed to the top of Pha Thi. At the time there were nineteen Americans at the site; sixteen U.S. Air Force technicians, two CIA case officers, and one Forward Air Controller from the attache office in Vientiane. A number of the technicians reacted to the assault by using pre-positioned rope slings to lower themselves down the side of the mountain and into a cave. The communists were able to grenade and machine-gun many of these men.

U.S. Air Force and Air America helicopters were called to the scene and rescued five of the air force men, the two CIA agents, the FAC, and a number of the indigenous defenders. This left eleven Americans at the site, eight known dead and three presumed dead. In an effort to "destroy the technical and personal equipment left behind," over a two week period the U.S. Air Force repeatedly bombed the site.⁸²

The loss of life at Pha Thi was a great tragedy for the U.S. military. It also posed a potential diplomatic problem for the United States and the Souvanna government. The site was an obvious violation of the Geneva agreements and when Ambassador Sullivan told the Lao prime minister that some of the bodies had not been recovered, "Souvanna winced ... and said they increased the risks that [the] enemy could be able,

if he chose, to make some pretty damaging disclosures."⁸³ The Vietnamese, however, did not make an issue of the site, perhaps realizing a protest would reveal their own illegal presence in Laos.

The circumstances surrounding the communist attack on Phu Pha Thi remain a controversial issue. Many have criticized Ambassador Sullivan for not ordering the Americans evacuated earlier.⁸⁴ However, intelligence information available at the time indicated the site was safe. Vang Pao has said that no one suspected the communists possessed mine detectors and would be able to make their way up the mined side of the mountain. Further, he has related that those killed "were technicians who really were not well trained soldiers."⁸⁵

During a 21 August 1990 interview in Vientiane General Singkapo Sikhotchounamaly, formerly commander of all Pathet Lao forces, made the following comments regarding the attack on Phu Pha Thi: "About one hundred Pathet Lao and more than two hundred North Vietnamese were involved in the attack. They used mine detectors. Some injured Americans were captured at the site and sent to North Vietnam." This was the first instance that any informed Lao Communist official had ever discussed the Pha Thi battle and revealed that some Americans had survived. General Singkapo's remarks also included the first official Pathet Lao admission that the Lao Communists, as a matter of policy, turned over captured Americans to the North Vietnamese.⁸⁶ To date, the U.S. lists eleven Americans

who were stationed at Phu Pha Thi in the "presumptive status of dead, body not recovered." United States officials are currently seeking permission from the Lao government to search for possible American remains at the former radar site. Efforts by the U.S. embassy in Vientiane are also underway to obtain additional information from General Singkapo.⁸⁷

The secret war in Laos was, indeed, William Sullivan's war. Ironically, having successfully concealed for more than four and a half years the true degree of American involvement in Laos, Ambassador Sullivan would return to Washington and quickly find himself compelled to publicly describe America's "quiet" war.

ENDNOTES FOR CHAPTER VI

1. William H. Sullivan, Obbligato: Notes on a Foreign Service Career (New York: Norton, 1984) 213.
2. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 208-9.
3. U.S., Laos Hearings, 309.
4. Presiding over a 1973 U.S. Senate Committee Armed Services hearing on the U.S. defense budget, Senator Stuart Symington, referred to Sullivan as a "satrap." Congress, Senate, Senate Committee on Armed Services, Hearings, Fiscal Year 1974 Authorization for Military Procurement, Research and Development, Construction Authorization for the Safeguard ABM, and Active Duty and Selected Reserve Strengths, pt. 8, 93d Cong., 1st sess., 1973, 5890. (Hereafter cited as U.S., Fiscal Year 1974). The Random House College Dictionary defines satrap as "a subordinate ruler, often a despotic one."
5. U.S., Laos Hearings, 517-8.
6. Blaufarb, "Unconventional War in Laos," 61-2.
7. Admiral Sharp told me that Ambassador Sullivan was never reluctant, if he thought it expeditious, to deal directly with the JCS on military matters. My interview with Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, U.S. Navy, retired, Honolulu, Hawaii, 6 March 1990.
8. General William C. Westmoreland, U.S. Army, letter to the author, 3 March 1990. General Westmoreland reaffirmed these

same thoughts with me in a 13 April 1990 telephone interview from his home in Charleston, South Carolina.

9. Blaufarb, "Unconventional War in Laos," 60. Sullivan was referring to National Security Advisor MacGeorge Bundy, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, Chairman of the JCS Earle G. Wheeler, and CIA Director John A. McCone.

10. For an example of Westmoreland's irritation over Sullivan's involvement see William C. Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports (New York: Dell, 1976) 449.

11. Ibid., 96-7, and interview of Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp by Dr. Robert R. Kritt, U.S. Naval Training Center, San Diego, California, 19 February 1971. (Transcript in my possession).

12. U.S., Laos Hearings, 518. Blaufarb, who attended the meetings, reports the daily presence of Sullivan "made the point that the Ambassador considered himself not only the Chief of Mission but also the operations manager." Blaufarb, "Unconventional War in Laos," 66.

13. My interview with Vang Pao, Santa Ana, California, 6 February 1979, and Blaufarb, "Unconventional War in Laos," 42.

14. The SGU "was a battalion composed of three line companies and a headquarters unit. Its arms were upgraded to include bazookas, medium-sized and even a few heavy mortars." Douglas S. Blaufarb, The Counterinsurgency Era (New York: Free Press, 1977) 157.

15. Ibid., 158-9, and St. Jean, McClain, and Hartwig, "Twenty-Three Years of Military Assistance to Laos," 47-8.

16. Central Intelligence Agency, "Intelligence Information Cable," 27 February 1964. (Document in my possession).
17. My interview with Yang Teng, 27 October 1979, and William M. Leary, letter to the author, 6 March 1991.
18. My interview with Cherry, 16 March 1979.
19. My interview with a respected Hmong source who wishes anonymity, San Diego, California, 27 October 1979.
20. Sullivan, Obbligato, 215-6.
21. Vang Pao, according to numerous accounts by knowledgeable observers, consistently risked danger so that he could personally view the battle and, if necessary, rally his forces. On the many occasions in 1979 and 1980 when I met personally with Vang Pao, or when I observed him with others, the general exuded a tremendous charismatic charm.
22. Sullivan, Obbligato, 213, and Ambassador William H. Sullivan, letter to the author, 9 November 1990.
23. My interview with Colby, 3 May 1988.
24. Department of the Air Force. Oral History Interview. Lieutenant Colonel Howard K. Hartley, USAF, retired. (Maxwell AFB, Alabama: 14 July 1974) 35.
25. Outgoing electrical message, "Special Operation," DEP CMDR 7/13AF Udorn RTAFB, Thailand, 1245Z, 17 December 1966. (Document in my possession).
26. Outgoing electrical message, "Infiltration of CAS Road Watch Team," DEP CMDR 7/13AF Udorn RTAFB, Thailand, 1100Z, 17 December 1966. (Document in my possession). Combined USAF/Air

America air assaults were also used to "insert" large size SGU's into battle areas. Outgoing electrical message, "Operation Left Jab," 7/13AF Udorn RTAFB, Thailand, 1112Z, 19 June 1969. (Document in my possession). The CIA paid the Air America crews special "project pay" for these missions. Payment procedures were similar to those used to compensate the Air America T-28 Strike Force. John Fonburg, letter to the author, 8 January 1989.

27. Example, "Twenty-five fish [Soviet trucks] moving" Transcription of "Journey from Pha Dong," Vang Yang, 1988, 14, and my interview with Yang Teng, 27 October 1979. See also Jack S. Ballard, The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia. Development and Employment of Fixed-Wing Gunships 1962-1972 (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, U.S. Air Force, 1982) 46.

28. Kenneth Conboy, The War in Laos, 1960-1975 (London: Osprey, 1989) 42-3.

29. Theodore Shackley, The Third Option: An American View of Counterinsurgency Operations (New York: Dell, 1981) 67-9.

30. Amazingly, the survivor was eventually repatriated in a prisoner exchange and, in 1979, was living in Minnesota. My interview with Yang Teng, 27 October 1979. Paramilitary specialist Kenneth Conboy has identified this failed team as part of an elite group called the "Commando Raiders." Kenneth Conboy, letter to the author, 18 April 1988. See also Conboy, War in Laos, 19.

31. My interview with Cherry, 16 March 1979.

32. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on U.S. Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad, Hearing, Activities of the U.S. Agency for International Development in Laos, 92d Cong., 2d sess., 1972, 4. (Hereafter referred to as U.S., AID Hearing).

33. For a distinctly anti-U.S. essay on the IVS and their contributions in Laos see John Lewallen, "The Reluctant Counterinsurgents: International Voluntary Services in Laos," in Laos: War and Revolution, ed. Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) 357-71.

34. Buell's life is the subject of the undocumented and often erroneous book by Don A. Schanche, Mister Pop. New York: David McKay, 1970. Schanche incorrectly reports that Buell participated in "blowing up bridges", 162-3. I have spoken with a number of Hmong soldiers, including Vang Pao, who deny Buell was involved in anything but humanitarian assistance. Numerous knowledgeable Americans agreed, describing Buell as invariably feisty, but "no commando." Buell was considered such a celebrity that the White House attempted in July 1964 to arrange a personal visit in Washington with President Johnson. DDRS, 1990, document 1637.

35. Blaufarb, "Unconventional War in Laos," 41-3.

36. CASI, Bird and Sons, and a few other smaller contractors also provided civilian airlift. Air America, however, performed the vast majority of the work.

37. Contract flying in Laos was not for the "rigid or timid." My interviews with Stuart, 24 March 1988, MacFarlane, 13 May 1989, Walker, 14 May 1989, and Lieutenant Colonel William R. Leonard, U.S. Air Force, retired, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 19 February 1988. Leonard was Chief, USAID Air Support Branch. Like most of the men working for the Requirements Office, Leonard was retired from the U.S. military.
38. My interview with Colonel Martin L. Kaufman, U.S. Air Force, Alexandria, Virginia, 19 May 1989.
39. The Lao General Staff was the equivalent of the American Joint Chiefs of Staff. Doty and Widner, "MAAG in Exile," 35.
40. Blaufarb, "Unconventional War in Laos," 46.
41. St. Jean, McClain, and Hartwig, "Twenty-Three Years of Military Assistance to Laos," 49, and Doty and Widner, "MAAG in Exile," 35-6.
42. Ibid.
43. U.S., Laos Hearings, 439.
44. The Ravens were administratively assigned to "Waterpump," but as TDY personnel were selected for assignment under the USAF "Palace Dog" program. Department of the Air Force. Oral History Interview. Major Jesse E. Scott, USAF. (Maxwell AFB, Alabama: 6 April 1973) 5-10.
45. U.S., Laos Hearings, 466-8.
46. Department of the Air Force. Oral History Interview. Captain Karl L. Polifka, Jr., USAF. (Maxwell AFB, Alabama: 17 December 1974) 59-60. I am grateful to Colonel Polifka who,

no less brash than when he returned from Laos, arranged a meeting between myself and a CIA case officer who served in Laos. This meeting, attended by Polifka and former Raven Michael D. Byers, provided me with considerable insight into the relationship between the Ravens, Vang Pao's army, and the CIA. My interview with Colonel Karl L. Polifka Jr., U.S. Air Force, Michael D. Byers, and an anonymous CIA source, Falls Church, Virginia, 25 May 1989. For some excellent photographs, and a non-scholarly account of the Raven operation in Laos, see Christopher Robbins, The Ravens: The Men Who Flew in America's Secret War in Laos. New York: Crown, 1987.

47. Tyrrell, "AF Oral History," 111.

48. Major General James F. Kirkendall, U.S. Air Force, retired, letter to the author, 25 July 1988. General Kirkendall was Deputy Commander, 7/13th Air Force, Udorn, Thailand, from April to October 1970. These same sentiments were related to me by Lieutenant General James D. Hughes. Lieutenant General James D. Hughes, U.S. Air Force, retired, audio tape response to author, 25 November 1988. General Hughes was Deputy Commander 7/13th Air Force, Udorn, Thailand, from September 1972 until April 1973.

49. Herring, America's Longest War, 126.

50. Futrell, USAF in SEA: The Advisory Years to 1965, 256.

51. DDRS, 1990, document 3338.

52. The aircraft were stationed at Korat, Thailand, but due to Thai political sensitivities were staged from Da Nang, South Vietnam. "Three RF-101s served as pathfinders and damage-assessment craft. Eight F-100s flew combat air patrol to guard against MIG interference. Four F-105s carried 750-pound bombs, 2.75-inch rockets, and 20-mm ammunition." Futrell, USAF in SEA: The Advisory Years to 1965, 256.

53. Berger, USAF in Southeast Asia, 104-5.

54. Sullivan, Obbligato, 211.

55. U.S., Laos Hearings, 456.

56. William W. Momyer, Airpower in Three Wars (Washington D.C.: Office of Air Force History, U.S. Air Force, 1985) 85-6. General Westmoreland, as a result of some of Ambassador Sullivan's targeting decisions, says he and his staff sometimes referred to the Ho Chi Minh trail as "Sullivan's Freeway." Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 256.

57. Hughes audio tape response, 25 November 1988. Although General Hughes took command in Thailand after Ambassador Sullivan's departure the air attache functions in Vientiane remained the same.

58. Berger, USAF in Southeast Asia, 122.

59. Major General Charles R. Bond, U.S. Air Force, retired, letter to the author, 1 May 1988. In the course of my research I contacted all nine generals who served as Deputy Commander, 7/13th Air Force. Seven of these officers responded; they all indicated they found the job quite

frustrating. General Bond served as Deputy Commander, 7/13th Air Force from January 1966 until March 1967.

60. Major General William C. Lindley, U.S. Air Force, retired, letter to the author, 11 May 1988. General Lindley served as Deputy Commander, 7/13th Air Force from June 1967 until May 1968.

61. Department of the Air Force. Air Force End-of-Tour Report, "Major General Andrew J. Evans, Jr., 16 October 1970 to 30 June 1971," 2. (Document in my possession).

62. My interview with Colonel Strathmore K. McMurdo, U.S. Army, retired, Honolulu, Hawaii, 11 October 1990, and my interview (by telephone) with Lieutenant Colonel Stuart A. Beckley, U.S. Army, retired, San Antonio, Texas, 20 October 1990. Colonel McMurdo served in Thailand from 1967-9 as DEPCHIEF Chief of Staff. Colonel Beckley served in Thailand and Laos from 1965-72 with DEPCHIEF, Project 404, and the U.S. Army Attache office.

63. U.S., Laos Hearings, 528.

64. Lieutenant Colonel Stuart A. Beckley, U.S. Army, letter to the author, 25 October 1990.

65. Sullivan letter, 9 November 1990.

66. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 209.

67. Major General Tucker, who had established DEPCHIEF in October of 1962, recommended in December 1962 that his position be downgraded to the rank of colonel. Three months later Colonel Daniel F. Munster was named DEPCHIEF. Outgoing

electrical message, "Orders," CINCPAC, Hawaii, 1300, 8 March 1963. (Document in my possession), and Department of Defense. "CINCPAC Command History, 1962," (Camp Smith, Hawaii: Office of the Command Historian, 1962) 221.

68. Sullivan letter, 9 November 1990.

69. Ibid.

70. Ambassador Sullivan occasionally left Laos to attend diplomatic and military conferences and was hospitalized in the United States for several weeks in 1968. Sullivan, Obbligato, 233. Nevertheless, given the tight control Sullivan exercised within his embassy, it seems highly unlikely any subordinate would authorize operations like "Duck" unless he received cleared from the ambassador.

71. Outgoing electrical message, "Operation Duck," DEP CMDR 7/13AF Udorn AFLD, Thailand, 0826Z, 20 March 1969. (Document in my possession). See also Bowers, Tactical Airlift, 461.

72. It is estimated that seventy percent of the bombs dropped on Laos were hitting targets along the so-called "Ho Chi Minh" infiltration trails in eastern and southern Laos. See St. Jean, McClain, and Hartwig, "Twenty-Three Years of Military Assistance to Laos," 103-4.

73. Phu is the Lao word for mountain, making the literal translation Pha Thi mountain.

74. Department of the Air Force, Captain Edward Vallentiny, USAF, "The Fall of Site 85." Project CHECO report. (Hickam AFB, Hawaii: Headquarters Pacific Air Forces, 1968) viii.

(Hereafter cited as Vallenty, "Site 85"). There is some confusion as to the exact type of radar placed at Phu Pha Thi. In his authoritative study of air warfare, General William W. Momyer refers to the Pha Thi radar system as an "AN-MSQ-77 Radar Bomb Directing Central." Momyer, Airpower, 178. However, in a 1115Z, 24 November 1967, electrical message from the Deputy Commander, 7/13th AF, to General Momyer, Commander 7th AF in Saigon, "TSQ 81" is used to identify the equipment. 75. My interview with Yang Teng, 27 October 1979, Vallenty, "Site 85," viii, and Momyer, Airpower, 178. The participation of Filipinos, presumably ECCOIL employees, was reported to me by Yang Teng.

76. Goldstein, American Policy, 310, and my interview with confidential sources, Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, 2 May 1988. My confidential sources are U.S. Air Force Pararescue specialists who were involved in rescue operations from Pha Thi.

77. Theodore H. Moore, letters to the author, 17 June, and 12 July 1988, and my interview (by telephone) with Theodore H. Moore, Reno, Nevada, 27 June 1988.

78. Vallenty, "Site 85," 12.

79. During the chase Captain Moore was assisted by Walt Darran, a Continental Air Services (CASI) pilot operating in the area. Darran relayed Moore's requests for assistance from U.S. Navy carrier-based aircraft in the Gulf of Tonkin. The

Navy planes did not arrive. Moore letters, 17 June and 12 July 1988, and my interview with Moore, 27 June 1988.

80. Vallenty, "Site 85," 12. One of the AN-2's was airlifted to Vientiane and placed on display near the That Luang temple. Goldstein, American Policy, 310. A photograph of the AN-2 is found in Berger, USAF in Southeast Asia, 128.

81. My interview with Moore, 27 June 1988.

82. Vallenty, "Site 85," 39-40, and my interview with Vang Pao, 6 February 1979.

83. Vallenty, "Site 85," 41.

84. Ray Robinson, "Report Describes Loss of Secret Base," The Sunday Oklahoman, 5 October 1986, and my interview with McMurdo, 11 October 1990.

85. My interview with Vang Pao, 6 February 1979. Another source reports that the Hmong unit at the base of Phu Pha Thi had been involved in a disagreement with Vang Pao's local military commander. Consequently, they may not have provided a warning to the people at the site. My interview with a respected Hmong source who wishes anonymity, San Diego, California, 27 October 1979.

86. My interview with General Singkapo Sikhotchounamaly, Vientiane, Laos, 21 August 1990. This information was provided to appropriate officials in the U.S. State and Defense Departments.

87. My interview with an official of the U.S. Joint Casualty

Resolution Center (JCRC), Bangkok, Thailand, 10 September
1990.

CHAPTER VII

CHANGING WAR, CHANGING RULES

Former CIA Director William E. Colby has said that the intelligence agency had a major role in Laos because it was important to conduct a "non-attributable war."¹ Since 1962 this presidentially approved strategy of "quiet" American involvement in the Lao war had been handled jointly by the Department of Defense, United States Agency for International Development, the Central Intelligence Agency and, with predominate authority, the Department of State. In late 1969, however, growing criticism of the Vietnam war and unconfirmed press reports of American paramilitary activity in Laos led Missouri Senator Stuart Symington to conduct formal Congressional hearings on U.S. involvement in the Far East. Hearings transcripts, albeit heavily censored, provided the first detailed official information on American activities in the Kingdom of Laos. Nevertheless the covert American military assistance program to Laos continued and, with greater participation by U.S.-paid Thai ground forces and American air power, took on the characteristics of a more conventional military struggle.

The Secret War Goes Public

On 20 October 1969 a subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations began closed hearings on the relationship between the United States and the Kingdom of Laos.² The

witnesses called to testify included senior Defense, State, and USAID officials, as well as the Director of the CIA. Particularly noteworthy was the appearance of William Sullivan, then serving as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, the U.S. Army and Air Force Attaches from Vientiane, and the commander of DEPCHEIF.

Senator Symington began the hearings with a political declaration which would characterize the often contentious exchanges between the witnesses and the subcommittee.

Today the Subcommittee ... begins hearings on Laos, another step in our country-by-country survey of the Far East. If there is any similar area where it would appear that the American people need and deserve more information, it is with regard to U.S. commitments and involvements in this small distant kingdom. In past years, high government officials have wrapped activity there in a cloak of secrecy, keeping details not only of policy but also of implementation of that policy hidden from those of us in the legislative branch with responsibilities in the foreign policy and military fields.³

Over a period of four days the committee and its well prepared staff conducted a spirited and rigorous examination of some very circumspect witnesses. Issues covered included U.S. commitments and military assistance to Laos, U.S. and North Vietnamese adherence to the Geneva accords, Lao and American air operations, capabilities of the Lao military, and the unique role of the American Ambassador and USAID. Once the hearings were completed the White House insisted that the committee transcripts be subjected to a thorough security review. In April 1970 the heavily censored transcripts were

released to the public.⁴

A month earlier, responding to Congressional pressure and military events in Laos, the White House issued a detailed statement by President Richard M. Nixon on the American-Laotian relationship. It was revealed that there were 1,040 Americans working on behalf of the U.S. government in Laos; 616 directly employed by the U.S. government and 424 working under American contracts. "... the total number, military and civilian, engaged in a military advisory or military training capacity numbers 320. Logistics personnel number 323." By comparison, the president said "there are 67,000 North Vietnamese troops in this small country." Nixon stressed:

Our goal in Laos has been and continues to be to reduce American involvement and not to increase it, to bring peace in accordance with the 1962 Accords and not to prolong the war. This is the picture of our current aid to Laos. It is limited. It is requested. It is supportive and defensive. It continues the purposes and operations of two previous administrations. It has been necessary to protect American lives in Vietnam and to preserve a precarious but important balance in Laos.

The statement went on to say that "No American stationed in Laos has ever been killed in ground combat operations."⁵ The press immediately began to report "leaked" stories to the contrary, causing the White House to issue a modified statement on 8 March 1970 which admitted that since the beginning of 1969 six American civilians and a U.S. Army captain had been killed in Laos. Total American "hostile deaths" in Laos since 1964 were put at one military advisor and 26 civilians.⁶

These official declarations were clearly erroneous. Winston Lord, special assistant to National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, was responsible for drafting the 6 March statement. In his memoirs Kissinger says that mistakes in the account were "the result of a series of misunderstandings and a failure of communication." He also reports that "Nixon was furious ... for a week I could not get an appointment to see him." Kissinger does not, however, address the fact that the second statement was also inaccurate.⁷

Nixon's reported anger would seem to suggest that the president was truly surprised at the U.S. casualties and had not attempted to intentionally deceive the American public. Nevertheless, because so many senior officials in the State Department, CIA, and the Pentagon were aware of the losses at Phu Pha Thi and the full extent of U.S. activities in Laos, it seems incongruous that Kissinger's staff was unable to compile an accurate version of America's Laotian involvement.

Not surprisingly, given the controversy generated over the initial statement, President Nixon's effort to avert future criticism and inquiry into U.S. military activity in Laos was largely unsuccessful. The press corps continued to demand information on the "secret war" and Congressional investigators began yearly visits to Laos. However, the president's acknowledgement that Americans were providing military assistance to the Lao did not, as feared by previous U.S. administrations and the Souvanna government, bring about

any strong Kremlin reaction.⁸ For nearly six years, the Soviets had mostly accepted the fiction of American and North Vietnamese compliance with the Geneva accords. Further, according to Lao specialist Arthur Dommen, by 1970 Moscow believed the American anti-war movement would soon force the U.S. out of Indochina.⁹ America's war in Laos would continue another three years, but ultimately the Kremlin's judgment was correct.

The "Congo Club"

William H. Sullivan was succeeded in March 1969 by G. McMurtrie Godley, another strong-willed "combat diplomat." Godley was well versed in paramilitary operations, having served from 1964 to 1966 as U.S. Ambassador to the Congo, a post known for its involvement in non-traditional diplomatic activity.¹⁰ In Laos Godley surrounded himself with people who had previously served with him in the Congo. This included the CIA Station Chief, the Deputy Chief of Mission, and the head of the embassy Political Section. According to Charles Stevenson, Godley had an affinity for military operations and was particularly agreeable to military requests.¹¹

Unfortunately, from the U.S. military perspective, Godley continued Sullivan's reliance on the CIA's military judgments. Unlike Sullivan, however, Godley did not enjoy an affable working relationship with Colonel Robert Tyrrell, the embassy's Air Attache. Tyrrell had a unique vantage point, having at various times worked in Laos for Ambassadors Unger,

Sullivan, and Godley. Tyrrell has praised Unger and Sullivan, but has said "I didn't get along with ... Ambassador Godley. I don't know why because I certainly was loyal to him But you can't get along with everybody no matter what you do." Colonel Tyrrell also believed that his official, and supposedly "Eyes Only" communications with U.S. Air Force headquarters in Saigon, were being read by the CIA.

Seventh Air Force ... sent a real blasting message up to me about the way the Embassy was dragging their feet on approving different targets concerning the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and I was afraid to answer that especially after CAS [CIA] in a conversation one night let a slip go by that told me they had read that message. So I don't know who all was reading [my personal messages].¹²

Tyrrell's difficulties were symptomatic of the strain between the American embassy in Vientiane and the U.S. military commanders at DEPCHIEF and 7/13th AF.

Just Rice and Bullets

As noted earlier, one of those called back to Washington to present testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was DEPCHIEF commander, U.S. Army Colonel Peter T. Russell. Under questioning Colonel Russell had disclosed that DEPCHIEF did not operate in an advisory manner, but rather reacted to requests from USAID/RO.¹³ This was a politic way of saying that DEPCHIEF was operating outside of standard military regulations. This non-professional approach to military assistance was a problem which caused great concern to Russell and senior CINCPAC and JCS military officers.

As a combat veteran who had worked extensively with paramilitary forces in South Vietnam, Russell had arrived in Thailand prepared to lend his expertise to the Lao land campaign. He was quickly initiated into the "Ambassador's war." Upon assuming command of DEPCHIEF Colonel Russell requested and received permission to attend a "Country Team" meeting in Vientiane. Although the colonel's initial visit went well, his return the following week was met by the Country Team with surprise and faintly disguised irritation. The DEPCHIEF commander was clearly an unwelcome presence in Laos. Colonel Russell's place was not at the table in Vientiane where decisions on the war were made, it was in Bangkok where he was expected to swiftly and efficiently carry out the embassy's wishes.¹⁴

Colonel Russell's experience is instructive. By choice, the U.S. ambassador to Laos decided to accept counsel from only two senior military officers, the U.S. Army and Air Force Attaches.¹⁵ In view of the growing level of U.S. military aid to Laos and the spiralling air war, the reliance on two colonels who were also responsible for many other diplomatic and representational duties seems wrong-headed. But, as discussed above, the CIA since 1962 had readily assumed major responsibilities for military operations in Laos. The ambassador believed the CIA and his military attaches possessed the skills necessary to successfully manage the war. Change, however, was on the way.

Easing the Ambassador's Grip

By 1969, if not before, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had become convinced that DEPCHIEF's responsibilities in Thailand and Laos required the attention of an army general. According to recently declassified CINCPAC records, the JCS proposed on 18 December 1969 that the Secretary of Defense approve the "assignment in Laos of a general officer who would serve as Defense Attache/CINCPACREP [CINCPAC Representative] Laos." "Political implications" prevented prompt adoption of the recommendation, but the JCS and CINCPAC continued to press for the change.¹⁶

The military's rationale for requesting senior supervision was cogently explained by Colonel Russell in his 1971 End-of-Tour report. Having served in the DEPCHIEF position for three years, Russell strongly felt that the American military aid program to Laos was both inefficient and poorly managed.

The Country Team is ill-suited to direct and coordinate the integration of military procedure and technique or to supervise major logistical operations. On the Lao Country Team ... ostensibly all are equals; however, some are more equal than others and DEPCHIEF is least equal of all. RO is a USAID organization, not responsible to or responsive to DOD direction. Neither DEPCHIEF nor CINCPAC can guide, inspect or request reports of RO, although RO can commit DOD to enormous expenditures of money, effort or equipment. Thus, with hundreds of millions of dollars involved annually in military affairs only; no one is really in charge.¹⁷

In mid-1971 the JCS won a partial victory in its quest to bring greater control and coordination to the Lao military

aid program. On 8 June the Secretary of Defense directed the movement of DEPCHIEF from Bangkok to Udorn, Thailand. The four most important components of the American military aid program to Laos, DEPCHIEF, the CIA's 4802d Joint Liaison Detachment, Air America headquarters, and Deputy Commander, 7/13th AF, were now jointly located. Moreover, plans were underway to assign a U.S. Army brigadier general as DEPCHIEF commander.

A General Joins the Country Team

Brigadier General John W. Vessey, Jr., who enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1939 and rose through the ranks to become Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff from 1982 to 1985, took command of DEPCHIEF in February 1972. The result of General Vessey's arrival in Laos and his initial meeting with Ambassador Godley was predictable. Vessey has recalled that "Ambassador Godley was not going to talk to me. When he finally did, he made it very clear to me that he did not ask for, did not want, and did not need a general on his staff. We later became good friends."¹⁸ Ambassador Godley remembers that Vessey "was not given the warmest welcome imaginable, but shortly his straightforwardness, common sense in military matters, intelligence, charm and sense of humor won the day."¹⁹

General Vessey's persuasive powers and hard work soon won an unprecedented concession from the ambassador. Travel to Laos by DEPCHIEF personnel had always been limited and required the ambassador's personal approval. Meetings

involving DEPCHIEF, therefore, were often held in Thailand. In a 30 September 1972 memorandum to Ambassador Godley the general pointed out that:

The performance of DEPCH assigned functions requires frequent visits with other elements of the Country Team ... simple mathematics of the situation require more people to travel when meetings are held in Udorn than when meetings are held in Vientiane. Suggest that you charge me with the responsibility of controlling DEPCH staff visits to Vientiane and with keeping those visits to the minimum required to get the job done.²⁰

Ambassador Godley quickly approved Vessey's request. The general had not only successfully joined the embassy Country Team, he soon was Ambassador Godley's primary military advisor.²¹

Over the next five months General Vessey conducted a comprehensive inspection of Royal Lao Army field and training units, Vang Pao's irregular forces, and the American-paid Thai "volunteer" troops in Laos. Travelling extensively throughout the kingdom, Vessey brought to the task a no-nonsense approach to military discipline and preparedness. What he found was often disappointing and an indication that the Royal Lao army and the Hmong irregulars, left to their own devices, were woefully unprepared to meet any North Vietnamese threat.²² In contrast, the Thai SGU's "had some very good leaders and there were some soldiers who fought very well. Nevertheless, most of the battalions were only marginally effective and that only when provided continuous liberal air support."²³

Paying for the Lao War

Funding America's military assistance program to the Kingdom of Laos was a complex undertaking involving monies from the Defense Department, United States Agency for International Development, and the Central Intelligence Agency. Following the extensive 1969 Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee hearings on Laos, Congressional critics of U.S. involvement in Laos increased their examination of America's role in the Lao war. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee began dispatching investigators to Laos and the Senate Committee on Armed Services began a close review of all DOD funding requests. Senator Stuart Symington expressed the Congressional concerns over monies spent in Laos:

It is apparent the Executive Branch considers itself free to draw upon first one appropriation and then another, or to shift programs back and forth between as many as three departments or agencies. In some instances activities which were once considered appropriate for funding by AID were then shifted to the Defense Department and later to the CIA.²⁴

This Congressional scrutiny led to a number of important changes in U.S. funding of the Lao military assistance program. In 1970 USAID costs for food and delivery expenses for Lao "military and paramilitary forces, and paramilitary dependents" was transferred to the Defense Department. The same year the CIA accepted funding responsibility for USAID-provided medical services and supplies to paramilitary forces.²⁵

Beginning in Fiscal Year 1968 (1 July 1967) the White

House had shifted Laos from Military Assistance Program (MAP) funding to Military Assistance Service Funded (MASF). According to administration officials this change, which also affected South Vietnam and Thailand, was enacted "to provide the flexibility needed to respond to combat conditions in Southeast Asia."²⁶ However, the conversion placed funding within the Defense Department's overall budget and, therefore, precluded the country-by-country review conducted under MAP procedures.²⁷ Critics, like Senator Symington, charged that the change from MAP to MASF allowed the White House to hide the actual costs of American activity in Laos. As a result, in 1971 Symington succeeded in gaining legislation which placed a \$350 million limitation on all U.S. aid to Laos.²⁸ The so-called "Symington Ceiling" was a watershed in U.S. involvement in Laos. For the first time there was serious Congressional oversight of the vast amount of money and material expended on behalf of the Lao kingdom.

During this same period the air support costs of the Lao war, exclusive of the U.S. military air campaigns over Laos, were mostly consolidated and transferred to the Department of Defense. However, because many CIA and USAID programs continued to utilize aircraft which were now under DOD contracts, representatives of the CIA, USAID, and DEPCHIEF formed a "Joint Agency Cost Sharing Team" to determine cost allocations. In February 1973 the team negotiated a cost sharing agreement which called for the three agencies to send

a consolidated monthly message to the Department of Defense. With this information the DOD could then direct the transfer of appropriate CIA, USAID, and DEPCHIEF funds.

According to a U.S. Air Force contracting officer, the establishment of the joint team also allowed DOD officials to more closely monitor contractor billings. This added oversight uncovered a number of questionable cost accounting practices, which were then quickly modified or deleted from the contracts.²⁹

Seasonal War and the Importance of American Air Power

Air support was a critical factor for the Lao, Hmong, and Thai irregulars fighting in Military Region II (northeastern Laos). In the Fall of 1969, at the urging of his CIA advisors, Vang Pao planned a daring campaign to retake the Plain of Jars. Operation "About Face" was designed to be a mostly "hit and run" assault against the battle hardened North Vietnamese 316th Division. Using the Hmong to face such a large conventional force was controversial and several longtime CIA veterans openly doubted the morality of such an undertaking.³⁰ Nevertheless the operation went forward and, supported by some two hundred U.S. Air Force sorties a day, on 12 September 1969 Vang Pao's forces captured the Pathet Lao "provincial capital" at Xieng Khouang. Enormous amounts of supplies were captured, "including more than 3 million rounds of ammunition, 150,000 gallons of gasoline, 12 tanks, 30 trucks, and 13 jeeps." Two weeks later Vang Pao's men

captured the key town of Muong Soui. "About Face" had caught the North Vietnamese totally off-guard.³¹

Vang Pao's successes were brief, however, as the North Vietnamese launched a tank-led counterattack in January 1970 and recaptured Xieng Khouang the following month. To stem the offensive, for the first time B-52's were ordered to strike targets in northern Laos. Over 17 and 18 February the bombers flew thirty-six sorties, dropping almost eleven hundred tons of munitions on the Plain of Jars.³² One author has reported that these air attacks caused the disappearance of the Plain of Jars "after a recorded history of 700 years."³³ More than twenty years later visitors are startled by the bomb-cratered landscape and the munitions remnants which continue to maim and kill those living on the Plain of Jars.³⁴

Despite the B-52 attacks, and scores of AC-47, AC-119, and AC-130 gunship night attack missions against communist resupply activity, the North Vietnamese recaptured Muong Soui and in March 1970 laid siege to Long Tieng. Poor weather conditions hampered bomb strikes against Vietnamese positions and Vang Pao was forced to evacuate his headquarters.³⁵ The CIA quickly organized an airlift and thousands of Lao government forces and eleven battalions of Thai irregulars were flown to the area. A Royal Thai Army artillery battalion also participated in the defense of Long Tieng.³⁶

Faced with a combination of additional troops and American air power, on 26 March the North Vietnamese withdrew

to the Plain of Jars.³⁷ Casualties from the offensive are not available, but an estimated 110,000 refugees who had settled near Long Tieng and the adjacent USAID headquarters at Sam Thong were forced to flee into the surrounding area.³⁸ The Lao government, and particularly Vang Pao and his American advisors, had suffered a major defeat.

From April 1970 to February 1971 the "seasonal war" continued to swing back and forth, but the communists were clearly gaining. In March 1971 the North Vietnamese, supported by Pathet Lao units, battered a government position at Bouam Long, located northwest of the Plain of Jars near Route Six. The communists then attacked Long Tieng with a barrage of 130-mm artillery fire. Once again, U.S. Air Force bombers were called in and "saved" the Hmong headquarters.

In June 1971 Vang Pao launched "About Face II" and retook the Plain of Jars. Just as predictably, six months later the communists had pushed the government forces back and were once again in control of the mountains surrounding Long Tieng. North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao strength in the area was estimated at some twelve thousand, while Vang Pao's forces numbered nineteen battalions of hill tribe irregulars (5,100), ten battalions of Thai irregulars (3,100), and four battalions of FAR infantry (645).³⁹

The battle became a contest between North Vietnamese long-range artillery pieces and American and Lao air power. While the Vietnamese used their 130-mm guns to pound

government positions, U.S. and Laotian pilots flew thousands of strike sorties. Despite the use by U.S. aircraft of precision guided "smart bombs," the communists did not withdraw from the Long Tieng area until the onset of the monsoon rains in mid-April.⁴⁰

The Breakdown of the Hmong Army

Since early 1968 the Hmong army of Vang Pao had shouldered the majority of Royal Lao government offensive ground operations. Conceived originally as a guerilla force, the Hmong were reorganized into three hundred-man "Guerilla Battalions" (three companies of a hundred men) and "Mobile Groups" of three to six battalions.⁴¹ As discussed above the Hmong were increasingly involved in conventional actions against sizable North Vietnamese forces. According to Douglas Blaufarb the Hmong were devastated, "The years of war had taken such a toll that the Meo [Hmong] resistance had exceeded the limits of its strength and was flagging. The steady drain of casualties had forced Vang Pao to call up thirteen- or fourteen-year olds."⁴²

By at least 1969, some Hmong elders were pleading with Vang Pao to move the mountain people from northeastern to western Laos, or even the mountains of northern Thailand. Prior to the beginning of the 1971-72 "dry season" campaign the U.S. embassy in Vientiane declared:

If the Meo [Hmong] suffer severe losses in the PDJ [Plain of Jars] campaign this year ... massive refugee movements will be generated ... and impetus

behind the Meo [Hmong] desire to pull out of the war completely will grow significantly. If the civilians begin to leave ... it would be difficult if not impossible for Vang Pao to prevent his troops from joining their dependents in a mass exodus from MR [Military Region] II.⁴³

No longer a functional army, the Hmong soldiers of northeastern Laos had become merely a dispirited throng of war-weary people urgently seeking safety for their families.

Brother Races

The declining Hmong military capability was a serious concern to the U.S. government. In September 1969 the American embassy in Vientiane had warned CINCPAC:

Despite our current efforts, when the next dry season arrives, the enemy will find himself much further forward than ever before at this time of year. Unless we can increase our strength, we shall be only capable of employing ... the spoiling attack ... and hope that with adequate air support we can hang on. The Meo [Hmong] are nearing the bottom of their manpower barrel. The RLG must get more mileage from its regular forces.⁴⁴

Sadly for the Hmong, after more than fourteen years of American military aid the Royal Lao Army remained incapable or unwilling to fight the North Vietnamese. Hundreds of millions of dollars had failed to offset poor leadership and motivation and, even with the assistance of U.S. air power, the FAR would not stand and defend their country. Thus, after employing the Hmong for a decade as surrogate soldiers while "building" a lowland Lao army, the United States was still unable to depend upon the FAR. Instead, America stepped-up Thai involvement in the Lao war.

Since 1962 the CIA's 4802d Joint Liaison Detachment had worked closely with "Headquarters 333" a covert Royal Thai military unit. Initially, Headquarters 333 managed the Lao operations of PARU teams, a Royal Thai army artillery battalion, and CIA-directed intelligence collection activities.⁴⁵ As Hmong casualties soared HQ 333 and the 4802d JLD began to recruit Thai "volunteers" for duty in Laos. According to an official U.S. Air Force study:

Arrangements for the actual recruiting of Thais were made at the Ambassadorial level in Bangkok. These arrangements were then translated into quotas which were assigned to the various RTA [Royal Thai Army] units. It was then up to the unit commander to fill the quota. Most frequently, squads, platoons, or whole companies volunteered as a unit. These volunteers were then sent to a CAS [CIA] training center ... where they were organized into battalions and Mobile Groups.

The Thai soldiers were given Lao names and identity cards, but continued to receive "regular pay, benefits, longevity, [and] promotions."⁴⁶ The U.S. funded all of these costs, plus a substantial pay supplement.⁴⁷ By April 1971 at least twelve Thai "volunteer" SGU battalions served in Laos.⁴⁸

Although a Thai general, Vithoon Yasawasdi, served as the principal link between the CIA and the Royal Thai government, Bangkok officially denied any formal involvement in the volunteer program.⁴⁹ Pressed in March 1970 to comment on the subject Deputy Prime Minister Prapass Charusathiara said "We are brother races. A Laotian living in Korat [Thailand] goes home to fight. He is not a Thai Army soldier sent to fight there."⁵⁰

Despite this obfuscation of the facts it was clear the program provided the Thais a number of important benefits. Bangkok, as discussed earlier, was anxious to see the Communists stopped on the Lao side of the Mekong river. Moreover, the generals who ruled Thailand were delighted with the excellent equipment, training, and valuable combat experience their men received at U.S. expense. The scope and covert nature of the program also invited corruption and, as a result, more than a few in the Thai military became very wealthy. These advantages, of course, did not come without considerable risk to the fighting men. During the 1971 siege of Long Tieng a Thai battalion suffered more than sixty percent casualties.⁵¹

The Final Save

Communist offensive military operations in Laos, characteristically, ceased with the start of the rainy season and the movement of the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao to heavily defended base camps. This strategy was changed in April 1972 when the communists decided to withdraw only a day's march from Long Tieng. As a consequence, Vang Pao's annual assault on the Plain of Jars met immediate resistance. According to one account the government offensive went no farther than the southern edge of the plain before it encountered a tank supported North Vietnamese infantry force.⁵²

Fortunately for Vang Pao and his threatened headquarters, the U.S. Air Force was also revising its tactics. After a

November 1972 visit to Laos General John W. Vogt, Commander of 7th AF, ordered 7/13th AF to develop an F-111 bombing program for northern Laos. To date, the communist forces had been able to resupply and maneuver during periods of darkness and bad weather. The F-111's night, all-weather capability would allow uninterrupted strikes against communist targets. Moreover, the Air Force had developed a ground beacon which provided the F-111 with an "easily identifiable and accurate offset air point for radar bombing."⁵³

Although Ambassador Godley was initially skeptical of the system, fearing it would reduce his requests for B-52 air strikes, Major General James D. Hughes, Deputy Commander, 7/13th AF, ordered the beacons located in Laos. By mid-November four beacons were in place and the F-111's were regularly striking targets in the Long Tieng area. Combined with daylight attacks by F-4's and B-52's, the F-111's "broke the ... attack on Long Tieng even before it could be launched." Godley was soon claiming the beacons were his own idea.⁵⁴

In anticipation of a cease-fire, in late December the remaining communist forces near Long Tieng withdrew and took up positions on and around the Plain of Jars.⁵⁵ The U.S. Air Force had once again saved the headquarters of the "secret war." But, after nearly nine years, American air power was about to end its participation in the Lao war.

Years of ambassadorial control over military operations in Laos had, however, left many American officers puzzled and annoyed. General Hughes, notwithstanding a good personal relationship with Ambassador Godley, shared the professional frustrations of his predecessors at 7/13th AF. The successful introduction of the F-111/beacon program in Laos brought about a major improvement in U.S. bombing operations. But it did not convince Godley that 7/13th AF should have the principal role in directing air operations in Laos. Ambassador Godley continued to delegate the control of air resources to his CIA Station Chief.

In his 1973 End-of-Tour Report General Hughes was quite blunt in his assessment of this policy:

The spontaneity with which the CIA approached planning may have been workable in the Congo where it had the convenience of a relatively simple force of B-26s and T-28s flown by mercenaries on its own payroll, but it was hardly suitable to the requirements of an organization as complex as the U.S. Air Force in Southeast Asia.⁵⁶

Reflecting on America's military experience in Laos and anticipating the possibility of future wars, General Hughes advised:

It is essential that we not forget the lessons we have learned in Laos. In any future similar conflict, we must insure that the Ambassador has, and uses, a senior, tactically experienced air advisor. It is interesting to speculate on the results that could have been achieved by an ... air effort, directed and guided by experts with professional experience and judgement, and supporting competently led ground forces with the spirit and will to fight.⁵⁷

In the Spring of 1973 the U.S. military aid program to

the Royal Lao government was about to enter a new, and final,
phase.

ENDNOTES FOR CHAPTER VII

1. My interview with Colby, 3 May 1988.
2. The subcommittee received classified testimony and limited attendance to those with a strict "need to know."
3. U.S., Laos Hearings, 365-6.
4. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 228. Since this study has already drawn extensively from these hearings, it is unnecessary to restate more than the principal topics. Over the past ten years the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has released to the National Archives a substantial amount of previously censored testimony on U.S. activity in Laos.
5. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Background Information Relating to Southeast Asia and Vietnam, 6th ed., 91st Cong., 2d sess., 1970, 359-61.
6. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 231-2.
7. Henry A. Kissinger, White House Years (Boston: Little, 1979) 456.
8. Roland A. Paul, "Laos: Anatomy of an American Involvement," Foreign Affairs 49 (April 1971) 545-6.
9. Arthur J. Dommen, "Laos in the Second Indochina War," Current History (December 1970) 327-8.
10. Robbins, The Ravens, 132-3.
11. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 225. While attending a State Department-sponsored conference on Laos in Washington, D.C., I had lunch with Ambassador Godley, his niece Jinny St.

Goar, and Lawrence Devlin, Godley's CIA Station Chief in Vientiane. The friendship and mutual admiration these men share for one another is still quite evident. Health problems have, unfortunately, affected Ambassador Godley's ability to speak without great difficulty. Nonetheless, Godley and Ms. St. Goar are writing a book based on his experiences in Laos. My interview with Ambassador G. McMurtrie Godley and Jinny St. Goar, Washington, D.C., 4 May 1988. Although Devlin participated in the conversation he requested his remarks be kept off the record.

12. Tyrrell, "AF Oral History," 107-8.

13. U.S., Laos Hearings, 528.

14. My interview (by telephone) with Colonel Peter T. Russell, U.S. Army, retired, Washington, D.C., 13 October 1990.

15. I have corresponded with the principal attaches of this period, Colonel Robert L.F. Tyrrell, U.S. Air Force, and Lieutenant Colonel Edgar W. Duskin, U.S. Army. Colonel Tyrrell has been unable to accurately recall much of his long service in Laos. Colonel Robert L.F. Tyrrell, U.S. Air Force, retired, letter to the author, 18 April 1988. I have, therefore, relied upon Tyrrell's 1969 Congressional testimony and his 1975 U.S. Air Force Oral History interview. Colonel Duskin, although initially amenable to written questions, has subsequently declined to answer my follow-up letters. Colonel Edgar W. Duskin, U.S. Army, retired, letter to the author, 29 October 1990. Colonel Duskin's silence is particularly

disappointing, because he has been described by a knowledgeable confidential source as "the dominant military figure (except for the CIA) during his two years in Laos." Duskin also testified during the 1969 Congressional hearings.

16. Department of Defense. "CINCPAC Command History, 1971," (Camp Smith, Hawaii: Office of the Command Historian, 1971) 422.

17. Department of Defense. Deputy Chief, Joint United States Military Advisory Group Thailand, End-of-Tour Report, Colonel Peter T. Russell, U.S. Army, 27 July 1971, 2-3. (Document in my possession).

18. My interview (by telephone) with General John W. Vessey, Jr., U.S. Army, retired, Garrison, Minnesota, 31 May 1989.

19. Jinny St. Goar, letter to the author, 1 March 1989.

20. Memorandum from Brigadier General Vessey to Ambassador Godley, "Country Clearance for DEPCH Staff Members," 30 September 1972, Udorn, Thailand. (Document in my possession).

21. St. Goar letter, 1 March 1989.

22. I make this observation after reviewing more than a dozen of General Vessey's lengthy inspection memorandums. These documents represent a small portion of declassified DEPCHIEF records provided to me by General Vessey's successor, Lieutenant General Richard G. Trefry, U.S. Army, retired.

23. My interview with Vessey, 31 May 1989, and Memorandum from Brigadier General Vessey to Major General Evans, "Thai SGU," 23 February 1973, Udorn, Thailand. (Document in possession).

24. U.S., AID Hearing, iv.

25. Ibid., 6.

26. Congress, Senate, Senate Committee on Armed Services, Hearings, Fiscal Year 1972 Authorization for Military Procurement, Research and Development, Construction and Real Estate Acquisition for the Safeguard ABM, and Reserve Strengths, pt. 2, 92d Cong., 1st sess., 1971, 2021. MASF is defined by the U.S. government as "all defense articles and defense services transferred to foreign countries or international organizations under the authority contained in the Department of Defense Appropriations Act." Doty and Widner, "MAAG in Exile," 40.

27. Doty and Widner, "MAAG in Exile," 41.

28. Congress, Senate, Senate Committee on Armed Services, Hearings, Fiscal Year 1973 Authorization for Military Procurement, Research and Development, Construction Authorization for the Safeguard ABM, and Active Duty and Selected Reserve Strengths, pt. 3, 92d Cong., 2d sess., 1972, 1603.

29. Colonel Martin L. Kaufman, U.S. Air Force, letter to the author, 10 March 1991. While assigned to DEPCHEIF Colonel Kaufman was a member of the Joint Agency Team.

30. Since 1968 a growing split had developed between some CIA veterans and younger, recently arrived CIA case officers. The "new breed" seemed insensitive to escalating Hmong casualties and the growing hill tribe refugee population. My interview

with Lair, 15 April 1988, and my interview (by telephone) with William M. Leary, Athens, Georgia, 2 March 1991.

31. Berger, USAF in Southeast Asia, 130.

32. Thus began three years of B-52 "Arc Light" strikes on northern Laos. Ibid., 131.

33. Frederic R. Branfman estimates that from May 1964 to September 1969 over 75,000 tons of bombs were dropped on the plain. No one is certain of the exact figure. Branfman, Voices From the Plain of Jars, 3-4.

34. Flying above the Plain of Jars in the early morning of 3 September 1990 I thought the water-filled craters resembled thousands of shiny coins. On the ground it seemed incongruous that such a quiet, cool, and green plain could have been subjected to such a massive assault. But, the steady stream of Vietnamese trucks I saw headed down Route Seven were a quick reminder of why the plain had been such an important target. My observations of the Plain of Jars, Xieng Khouang, Laos, 3 September 1990.

35. Berger, USAF in Southeast Asia, 131.

36. Department of the Air Force, Major William W. Lofgren, USAF and Major Richard R. Sexton, USAF, "Air War in Northern Laos 1 April - 30 November 1971." Project CHECO report. (Hickam AFB, Hawaii: Headquarters Pacific Air Forces, 22 June 1973) 23. (Document in my possession).

37. Berger, USAF in Southeast Asia, 134.

38. Blaufarb, The Counterinsurgency Era, 164.

39. Lofgren and Sexton, "Air War in Northern Laos," 88-9.
40. Berger, USAF in Southeast Asia, 134.
41. Ibid., 44.
42. Blaufarb, The Counterinsurgency Era, 164.
43. Lofgren and Sexton, "Air War in Northern Laos," 44, and 86.
44. Department of Defense. "CINCPAC Command History, 1969," (Camp Smith, Hawaii: Office of the Command Historian, 1969) 202.
45. My interview with Thammarak, 13 September 1990.
46. Lofgren and Sexton, "Air War in Northern Laos, 46-7."
47. A Thai "volunteer" could expect to receive approximately three times his normal Thai army pay. For a private this came to about \$75 per month. The men also received, by Thai standards, very substantial reenlistment and end-of-tour bonuses. U.S., Thailand, Laos, Cambodia: January 1972, 20.
48. Lofgren and Sexton, "Air War in Northern Laos, 47."
49. During a five-week research visit to Thailand in the Fall of 1990 I made several attempts to interview General Vithoon or "Thep," as he was code-named during the Lao war. Despite the intercession of several senior Thai officers and a former CIA colleague, General Vithoon declined my requests for an interview. The general is now an exceedingly wealthy man, has experienced some political problems resulting from a failed Thai coup attempt, and has no interest in discussing his past.
50. Cited in Dommen, Conflict in Laos, 284.

51. Lofgren and Sexton, "Air War in Northern Laos," 46-7.
52. Conboy, The War in Laos, 11.
53. The AN/PPN-118 beacon weighed only twenty pounds and could be easily transported and set-up by indigenous soldiers. Department of the Air Force. Headquarters 7/13AF, Udorn, Thailand. Major General James D. Hughes, USAF, End-of-Tour Report. 10 September 1972 - 19 April 1973. Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, 20 April 1973, 4-5.
54. Ibid., and Hughes audio tape response, 25 November 1988.
55. Hughes, "End of Tour," 4.
56. Ibid., 11, and Hughes audio tape response, 25 November 1988.
57. Hughes, "End of Tour," 14.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DENOUEMENT OF U.S. MILITARY AID TO THE ROYAL LAO GOVERNMENT

Pathet Lao declarations notwithstanding, the war in Laos only marginally involved the political aspirations of the Lao people. A purely Lao solution to the kingdom's political problems would have been achieved with ample compromise and a minimum of bloodshed. The carnage visited on Laos was the result of Ho Chi Minh's military and political struggle to reunite Vietnam and a concomitant United States effort to halt the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia. Thus, there had never been any doubt in Vientiane or Washington that an agreement ending the war in Vietnam would also bring about a Laos settlement.

The Third and Final Agreement

On 22 September 1972, as United States and Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) negotiators in Paris moved toward apparent concordance, the Pathet Lao announced their willingness to begin peace talks with the Lao government. The Communist offer, made without preconditions, was promptly accepted by the Souvanna government and on 17 October the two sides commenced formal discussions in Vientiane. The debate centered immediately on two concerns: the American, Thai, and Vietnamese presence in Laos and the development of a new truly representative Laotian government. After more than twenty

years of war, the basic issues of foreign intervention and Communist participation in the Lao political process were unchanged.¹

There was, however, one critical difference between the 1954 and 1962 Geneva agreements on Laos and any forthcoming political settlement. Permeating the 1972 peace talks was Souvanna's certainty that the Nixon administration was determined to extricate the United States from the Indochina war. There was little indication that America would ever again commit its military power and national prestige to protect the Lao kingdom's avowed quest for neutrality.

Reacting to the fitful Paris negotiations, the Vientiane talks made little progress until mid-December 1972. Following a week-long strategy session at their Sam Neua headquarters, on 12 December the Pathet Lao delegation presented Souvanna with a draft agreement. Although the Lao government countered with its own proposal, the two sides were not far apart. Still, a Lao settlement awaited a final outcome in Paris.² On 27 January 1973, DRV Politburo member Le Duc Tho and U.S. National Security Advisor Henry A. Kissinger signed the Paris Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam. Article Twenty of the agreement specifically addressed the security concerns of the Lao government.

The parties participating in the Paris Conference on Vietnam shall strictly respect the ... 1962 Geneva Agreements on Laos. Foreign countries shall put an end to all military activities in Cambodia and Laos, totally withdraw from and refrain from reintroducing into these two countries troops,

military advisors and military personnel, armaments, munitions and war material.³

Although not part of the final Paris peace agreement, Le Duc Tho gave Kissinger a written pledge that within fifteen days the PAVN would initiate a cease-fire in Laos.⁴

On 9 February, en route to Hanoi,⁵ Kissinger stopped in Vientiane for talks with Souvanna. What happened next is a matter of some dispute. Kissinger has written that he was emotionally moved by Souvanna's plea that the United States ensure North Vietnamese compliance with the Paris Agreements. Kissinger told Souvanna "We have gone through great difficulties, and we did not come all this way in order to betray our friends."⁶ In contrast, Arthur Dommen has claimed that Kissinger came to Vientiane "to inform the Laotians that U.S. military support was approaching its end and that, unless they soon accepted whatever settlement was being offered by the ... [Pathet Lao] in return for a cease-fire, they stood to lose everything."⁷

Recently available evidence indicates that at this critical juncture United States policy towards Laos was ill-defined and somewhat in disarray. While Kissinger was likely pressuring Souvanna to quickly come to agreement with the Pathet Lao, and in effect undercutting the Royal Lao bargaining position, the U.S. embassy in Vientiane was being ordered by the State Department to plan for continued conflict in Laos. As will be expanded on later, this was a curious circumstance which brought puzzlement and consternation to

both the Lao government and those American planners attempting to comply with the provisions of the Lao peace settlement.

When Kissinger reached Hanoi on 10 February he was confronted with some adroit diplomatic gamesmanship. Prime Minister Pham Van Dong told Kissinger that a Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia and Laos would not take place upon imposition of a cease-fire, as Kissinger believed, but only upon the conclusion of a political settlement in the two countries. Although Kissinger has called the Vietnamese action an "outrageous interpretation" of Article Twenty of the Paris agreements,⁸ he took no action which would have interfered with the on-going American prisoner-of-war release. Dommen believes that the Vietnamese Communists were told by their Vientiane embassy of Kissinger's ultimatum to Souvanna and felt they had the leverage to present the American diplomat "with a fait accompli in Hanoi."⁹ This scenario seems to ring true.

Shortly after Kissinger's Hanoi visit the Pathet Lao and Royal Lao government came to terms and on 21 February 1973 an Agreement on the Restoration of Peace and Reconciliation in Laos was signed in Vientiane. A Lao cease-fire took effect the next day.

The Vientiane Agreement

Articles Two, Three, and Four of the Vientiane Agreement had consequences for the U.S. military aid program to the Royal Lao government. Article Two declared that foreign

countries would cease the bombing of Lao territory and all foreign armed forces would completely and permanently cease all military activities in Laos. Article Three included a prohibition against "espionage by air and ground means." Article Four required that:

Within a period no longer than 60 days, counting from the date of the establishment of the Provisional Government of National Union ... the withdrawal of foreign military personnel, regular and irregular, from Laos, and the dismantling of foreign military and paramilitary organizations must be totally completed. "Special Forces" - organized, trained, equipped and controlled by foreigners - must be disbanded; all bases, military installations and positions of these forces must be liquidated.¹⁰

The Royal Lao government, which the agreement called the "Vientiane government side," and the Pathet Lao, or "Patriot Forces side," were required to hold general elections to elect a new National Assembly and form a Government of National Union. The immediate requirement, to be implemented within 30 days of signing the agreement, was the establishment of a Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU) and a National Political Consultative Council (NPCC). These two entities would administer the country's affairs until the formation of a permanent government. Stalling on both sides delayed the signing of a protocol on the formation of the PGNU and the NPCC until 14 September 1973 and the new government was not promulgated until 5 April 1974.¹¹

Outwardly, the Vientiane Agreement and the creation of the Provisional Government of National Union seemed to hold great promise for the Lao kingdom. The inclusion of the

Pathet Lao in the governmental process seemed to set the stage for resolution of the country's internal political problems. Moreover, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam had pledged -- albeit obliquely -- to remove its army from Laos, thereby solving the kingdom's only serious external security threat. After nearly two decades of demonstrating that American money alone could not produce a good army, the Royal Lao government could scarcely have expected much better.

America immediately undertook efforts to comply with the Vientiane Agreement. A halt to all U.S. bombing of Laos went into effect with the 22 February cease-fire. This included the activities of the "Raven" Forward Air Controllers and the Laos-based "Waterpump" personnel.¹² With two brief exceptions, the United States had ended some nine years of combat air operations over Laos.¹³ A complete ban on American air reconnaissance missions, which would have severely reduced the capability to detect Communist cease-fire violations, was not consistently followed.

The United States also began planning for the reduction and/or elimination of the other components of the Lao military aid program; civilian contract air services, the Thai SGU's, Vang Pao's irregular army, Project 404, the USAID Requirements Office, and DEPCHIEF.

The Demise of Air America in Laos and Thailand

The cease-fire in Laos signalled the end of Air America's long association with the American aid program to Laos. A

longtime target of Pathet Lao propaganda, the communists justifiably considered the airline part of the CIA's paramilitary operations and there was little possibility that a new Lao government would allow the company a continued presence in Laos. Moreover, although the Air America air maintenance facility at Udorn was considered by the U.S. military one of the finest in Asia and would be a logical source of post-war repairs and upkeep for Lao Air Force transports, the Thai government opposed the continued presence in Thailand of the high profile, foreign contractor.

In addition to political problems, the airline also suffered from a sharp reduction in post cease-fire USAID and DOD air support missions. By June 1973 the Air America fleet had been cut in half and by year's end another twenty-five percent was eliminated. The contracts of other smaller air carriers were similarly effected. In mid-1974 Air America sold its Udorn facility and turned the complex over to the Thai government-affiliated Thai-Am corporation.¹⁴ Nonetheless, Air America would continue reduced operations in Laos well into 1975 and played a key role in the evacuation to Thailand of General Vang Pao and many of his followers.¹⁵

For more than a decade Air America was synonymous with U.S. activity in Laos. This study has only briefly discussed the airline's everyday resupply missions and extraordinary involvement in special operations and search and rescue missions in Vietnam and Laos. Much of what the Air America

pilots and crews accomplished in Southeast Asia will never be completely revealed or appreciated. But, without Air America or a similar civilian air carrier, the United States could never have supported a military aid program in Laos. It is also important to note that during their service in Laos many Air America pilots and crews, at considerable risk to themselves, were responsible for saving the lives of dozens of downed American, Thai, and Lao military aviators.¹⁶

Withdrawing the Thai SGU's

As discussed earlier, since 1969 the Thai SGU's had played a critical role in the defense of northeastern Laos. When the 22 February cease-fire took effect the CIA and Thai Headquarters 333 had twenty-seven infantry and three artillery battalions (about seventeen thousand Thai soldiers) serving in Laos.¹⁷ In accordance with Article Four of the Vientiane Agreement the Thais were required to leave Laos within sixty days of the formation of a provisional government.¹⁸ However, the scope of the Thai involvement and the political and military reasons for their presence made the SGU withdrawal from Laos a very complex process.

As the Lao conflict approached an apparent political conclusion there was considerable doubt in Washington, Bangkok, and Vientiane as to whether the Vietnamese Communists would withdraw completely from Laos. The continuation of the Thai SGU's in Laos, therefore, was envisioned as a possible guarantee against DRV non-compliance. Vice-President Gerald

R. Ford, on the eve of an early February 1973 visit to Thailand, was informed by the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok that the Thai SGU's could "serve as a deterrent to violations of the cease-fire and leverage to bring about the withdrawal from Laos of [the] North Vietnamese."¹⁹

Moreover, even after the Thai SGU's returned home, there were plans to maintain at least part of the force along the Thai-Lao border as a "hedge against [the] resumption of hostilities."²⁰ On 19 January 1973 in Bangkok this position was reviewed and affirmed by Thai Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn in a meeting with White House Chief of Staff Alexander M. Haig, Jr.²¹ A month later, in a meeting with then Assistant Secretary of State William Sullivan, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma agreed that the Thai SGU's should be kept ready in Thailand for a possible reintroduction into Laos.²²

By April 1973 however, with a relatively successful cease-fire in effect and no progress on the formation of a new Lao government, the United States reevaluated the cost and usefulness of the SGU program.²³ The maintenance of a single Thai infantry battalion for one non-combat year in Laos was calculated at \$1.15 million dollars, while a fifteen battalion force, based in Thailand for six months, was estimated to cost nearly \$13 million dollars.²⁴ When the SGU expenses were added to the other planned Lao military and economic aid programs the total was expected to exceed the "Symington Ceiling" on allowable U.S. aid to Laos.

There was also growing doubt in the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane that the SGU's, whether in Laos or Thailand, would indeed act as a deterrent to DRV violations of the Paris Agreement.²⁵ Past performance demonstrated that the SGU's were only effective in Laos with virtually unlimited American air power and logistics support. The SGU's were a political statement, but without American support they were not a significant military threat. Having just managed to disengage American combat forces from South Vietnam and in the throes of the Watergate revelations, the Nixon administration was understandably uneasy about the continuation of a program which conceivably could draw the United States back into the Indochina war.

On 1 July 1973, the U.S., in concert with the Thai and Lao governments, began eliminating the Thai SGU program. The Thai force in Laos was immediately reduced to seventeen battalions (2 artillery and 15 infantry) and Headquarters 333 was told the SGU's would be cut to ten battalions (1 artillery and 9 infantry) by 1 January 74. Termination of the program was planned for 30 June 1974, "irrespective of whether the units are deployed in Laos or garrisoned in Thailand."²⁶

The End of Vang Pao's Army

In anticipation of the 22 February cease-fire, on 20 February the Lao government ordered the integration into the Royal Lao Army of eighteen thousand CIA funded and directed Lao irregulars. This action prevented the Pathet Lao from

demanding the dissolution of what were essentially prohibited "paramilitary forces." Even after assimilation into the Lao Army the former irregulars maintained their unit integrity and were paid supplemental bonuses by the CIA.²⁷

Vang Pao remained in command of Military Region II (northeastern Laos) and, along with his CIA advisors, awaited the coming provisional government. But, in the opinion of the new DEPCHIEF commander, Brigadier General Richard G. Trefry, neither the Hmong general nor his advisors seemed to understand that American largesse was about to end. Repeated suggestions to improve roads in the region, and thereby prepare for the complete withdrawal of contract air support, were mostly ignored. Similarly, Vang Pao was in no hurry to incorporate his command into the Royal Lao Army logistics system. The Lao supply line was admittedly slow and bumbling, but it would soon be the sole source for Vang Pao's forces.²⁸

The inescapable truth was that Vang Pao knew the Pathet Lao had marked the Hmong army for elimination. Since 1962 the Hmong had suffered over ten thousand killed; more than one hundred thousand Hmong were now refugees dependent upon government support. Vang Pao felt he could do little more than await the formation of the PGNU and the certain coming of Communist retribution.²⁹

Reorganizing the U.S. Military Presence in Laos

By mid-February 1973, planning was well underway for a post cease-fire U.S. military assistance program for the Lao

kingdom. In contrast to past U.S. covert policies, DEPCHIEF recommended the creation of a uniformed thirty-man Defense Attache Office (DAO) within the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane. The DAO would assume all responsibilities previously assigned to the USAID Requirements Office, Project 404, and DEPCHIEF. Under the plan, the DAO would be commanded by a Defense Attache who would act as the ambassador's senior military advisor and would oversee all U.S. military assistance programs. A small staff in Udorn, Thailand, would assist with logistical matters.³⁰

The presence in Vientiane of a Defense Attache would finally establish a single U.S. manager for Lao military assistance. Douglas S. Blaufarb has argued that after the 1962 Geneva agreements the U.S. ambassadors to Laos, and in particular Ambassador Sullivan, acted as the "single manager" for the Lao war.³¹ The ambassadors exercised tremendous control over all aspects of U.S. activity in Laos, but they were not military managers. To a great extent their judgments were influenced by CIA officials, like Blaufarb, and military attaches with no operational responsibilities. As General Vessey stated in a memorandum for Ambassador Godley, the proposed Defense Attache Office would allow the "U.S. Mission in Laos ... [to] more closely conform to the general pattern of [other] U.S. Missions."³²

When General Trefry explained the reorganization proposal at the Vientiane Country Team meeting on 20 February 1973,

Ambassador Godley's only comment related to the proposed DAO rank structure. Under the plan the Defense Attache would be an army brigadier general, supported by two assistant attaches, an army colonel and an air force lieutenant colonel. Godley, who a year earlier had snubbed the arrival of General Vessey, wanted a general and two colonels.³³ The winds of change were certainly blowing in Vientiane.

In April 1973 Brigadier General Trefry took operational control of the Requirements Office and merged its duties with the Project 404 and DEPCHIEF responsibilities. The general concentrated his personnel on building a workable logistics system for the Royal Lao military. The task was made difficult by years of Lao dependency on foreign technicians like the Filipino ECCOIL employees, and a misguided belief that everything would somehow work out. After all, twice before the United States had helped the Lao government out of its troubles.³⁴

There was, nonetheless, reason to believe that the U.S. was not totally committed to a significant military withdrawal from Laos. On 31 March 1973 the State Department directed the U.S. embassy in Vientiane to "take no steps which might impair existing U.S. or RLG military operational capabilities until further notice." This restriction placed the Vientiane Country Team, and particularly the U.S. military aid officials, in a very awkward position. DEPCHIEF, as mentioned earlier, was struggling to make the Lao self-sufficient. At

the same time, the State Department was directing that there be no degradation in U.S. support of the Lao military. This directive was also in conflict with the reduced availability of aid funds for Laos. Although General Trefry attempted on numerous occasions to gain "relief" from the order, the State Department never officially rescinded its edict.³⁵

Despite the ambiguous directions, the number of Americans involved in the Lao military aid program was significantly reduced. At the time of the cease-fire there were about 180 U.S. military and civilian employees working with the Lao military. By late August 1973 this number had been reduced by nearly half.³⁶

Although Charles S. Whitehouse, the U.S. Ambassador to Laos, and his staff recognized the possibility that the impending provisional government could ban the introduction of any military equipment into the kingdom, the U.S. went ahead with the establishment of a Defense Attache Office.³⁷ On 5 September 1973, with the approval of Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, General Trefry moved from Udorn to Vientiane with a fourteen-man support team and became the U.S. Defense Attache to Laos. DEPCHIEF was then officially placed under the control of the Defense Attache Office.³⁸ The United States was now prepared to administer a continued, albeit much reduced, military assistance program in Laos.

Formation of the PGNU

The Provisional Government of National Union was finally

promulgated by royal decree on 5 April 1974. In a foreboding act, two days earlier Prince Souphanouvong had entered Vientiane to celebrations and excitement unseen in the capital for many years.³⁹ Souvanna Phouma was selected as the new prime minister and president of the Council of Ministers. Prince Souphanouvong took charge of the newly formed National Political Consultative Council, which immediately became the most powerful political force in the new government. Souphanouvong's royal charm and political savvy were soon winning support from all levels of Lao society.⁴⁰ Moreover, Souvanna suffered a heart attack on 11 July 1974, opening the way for his brother to gain even more influence.⁴¹

The provisional government declared Vientiane and Luang Prabang neutral cities and the Pathet Lao quickly shared in the administration and policing of these two capitals. Yet, the communists refused to allow outside representatives to visit the Pathet Lao "capital" at Sam Neua or to travel in any of their so-called "liberated zones." A statement attributed to the Pathet Lao and often repeated in Vientiane was "what is ours is ours, and what is yours is half ours."⁴² The Pathet Lao, although never a dominant military force, were certainly winning the political war in Laos.

Closing Out U.S. Military Aid to Laos

With the 5 April 1974 establishment of the PGNU all foreign military personnel not assigned diplomatic status were required to leave the kingdom within sixty days. Over the

previous six months the Thai SGU's in Laos had been slowly reduced in strength and the remaining few battalions left the kingdom on 22 May 1974.⁴³ On the 5 June deadline the United States military presence in Laos stood at thirty military personnel and fifteen civilians, all duly registered with the new government.⁴⁴

For the next seven months the DAO did what it could to resupply the Royal Lao army, without intentionally providing assistance to the Pathet Lao forces. However, on 15 February 1975, General Khamouan Boupha, the Pathet Lao Secretary of State for Defense, formally asked the U.S. to begin providing all military assistance directly to the PGNU. Khamouan's request was turned aside. But, with steadily increasing Pathet Lao control of the Lao government, continued U.S. military aid to the FAR was soon to become a very contentious issue between the PGNU and the United States.

Laos Becomes the Third Domino

Following the formation of the PGNU the Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese allies moved against the FAR military positions. Vang Pao, defiant at his Long Tieng headquarters, attempted to fight the communist encroachments. But the Hmong no longer enjoyed American or Thai assistance and Souvanna had decided the Hmong general had outlived his usefulness. On 6 May 1975, Vang Pao and the prime minister had a very angry confrontation; the general resigned his commission.⁴⁵ On 14 May, Vang Pao, his immediate family, and a number of senior

Hmong officers were flown by the CIA to exile in Thailand. In the following days and months tens of thousands of Hmong followed Vang Pao across the Mekong.⁴⁶

In the wake of the April 1975 Communist victories in South Vietnam and Cambodia and the collapse of the Vang Pao army, five non-Communist members of the PGNU cabinet resigned and fled to Thailand. They were soon joined by thousands of panicked Royal Lao government military and civilian officials. Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma responded on 7 June 1975 by appointing a Pathet Lao collaborator, Peng Phongsavan, as Minister of Defense and Pathet Lao General Khamouan Boupha as Commander of the Lao Armed Forces.⁴⁷

By the end of April, Ambassador Whitehouse and the Director of USAID had both departed Laos and there were no announced plans for replacements. On 10 May the State Department approved plans for a quiet withdrawal of U.S. embassy personnel. "This was to be done as inconspicuously as possible ... so as to avoid giving a wrong signal to our friends and creating the impression that we are pulling out of Laos." Four days later, Pathet Lao-controlled student mobs seized equipment and ransacked the USAID facility in Savanakhet and confiscated USAID supplies in Luang Prabang.⁴⁸ On 21 May the USAID headquarters in Vientiane was occupied by 150 students and Lao employees. A week long stand-off between the demonstrators and two U.S. Marine guards and an American civilian, who had barricaded themselves in one of the

buildings, was ended with a U.S. promise to end the USAID program.⁴⁹

In one last effort at reaching an accommodation with the new Lao government, on 2 June 1975 Assistant Secretary of State Philip C. Habib arrived in Vientiane for talks with Souvanna Phouma. According to the U.S. embassy in Vientiane the prime minister told Habib:

The press says the Pathet Lao are taking over. It's not true. Perhaps in five or six years Laos will be communist, but they are reasonable and nationalists. They respect our monarchy and there will be no dictatorship.⁵⁰

Following the late June seizure by demonstrators of five more U.S. facilities, the USAID mission to Laos was closed on 30 June 1975. On 31 July the American Embassy, now staffed by just twenty-two personnel, announced the termination of the military aid program for the Royal Lao government. Two weeks later DEPCHEIF was disestablished.⁵¹ Twenty years of U.S. military assistance to Laos had come to an end.

Following a Congress of People's Representatives held in Vientiane on 1 and 2 December 1975, the Pathet Lao declared an end to the Lao monarchy and the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic.⁵²

ENDNOTES FOR CHAPTER VIII

1. Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 103.
2. Ibid., 104.
3. Henry A. Kissinger, Years of Upheaval (Boston: Little, 1982) 1231-2.
4. Ibid., 21.
5. According to Kissinger, "The purpose of my journey to Hanoi in February 1973 was to encourage any tendencies that existed to favor peaceful reconstruction over continued warfare, to stabilize the peace insofar as prospects of American goodwill could do so, and to warn of the serious consequences should these hopes be disappointed." Ibid., 23.
6. Ibid., 22.
7. Dommen, Keystone of Indochina, 94. Dommen bases this contention on the recollections of Lao Major General Oudone Sananikone. Sananikone says Souvanna Phouma was impatient for a cease-fire and John Gunther Dean, Deputy Chief of Mission, "was also very anxious that the negotiations not stall. He and his staff frequently urged members of the government to make more concessions to the Neo Lao Hak Sat [Pathet Lao]." Sananikone also claims the U.S. pressured the Lao army by threatening to cut off salary payments and fuel and rice shipments. Sananikone, The Royal Lao Army, 149-50.
8. Kissinger, Years of Upheaval, 34-5.
9. Dommen, Keystone of Indochina, 94.

10. Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 365-6.
11. Ibid., 105-6.
12. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam: April 1973, Staff Report Prepared for the Use of the Subcommittee on U.S. Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad of the Committee on Foreign Relations, 93d Cong., 1st sess., 1973, 18.
13. Two days after the cease-fire, at the request of the Souvanna government, B-52's attacked encroaching PAVN forces on the Bolovens plateau in southern Laos. The heavy bombers also returned in April 1973 to strike communist forces attempting to overrun a Vang Pao position on the Plain of Jars. Berger, USAF in Southeast Asia, 135. My final combat mission over Laos was flown on 8 February. I can still quite vividly recall the anger and disappointment of one young pilot who craved the danger and excitement of combat flying.
14. St. Jean, McClain, and Hartwig, "Twenty-Three Years of Military Assistance to Laos," 175-6. Anticipating the cease-fire's effect on their operations, in mid-March 1973 the President and Managing Director of Air America paid visits to DEPCHIEF at Udorn and the American embassy in Vientiane. Little could be done to change the situation. Air America was too closely linked to the CIA in Laos and the Thais were very anxious to takeover the lucrative Udorn facility. DEPCHIEF Memorandum for Record, "Visit of Mr. Grundy, President of Air

America and Mr. Velte, Managing Director," 14 March 1973, Udorn, Thailand. (Document in my possession).

15. Department of Defense. "CINCPAC Command History, 1973," (Camp Smith, Hawaii: Office of the Command Historian, 1973) 489, and New York Times, 13 July 1975.

16. For several years I attempted to document the number of U.S. military pilots rescued by Air America crews. The job was made impossible by the passage of time, poor and intentionally misleading record keeping, and Air America employees who understandably continue to abide by past security oaths. The Air America "saves" I did document are testimony to the concern all professional airmen share for one another.

17. Department of Defense. Defense Intelligence Agency. "End-of-Tour Report, Major General Richard G. Trefry, U.S. Army, Defense Attache, Vientiane, Laos, 12 December 1974," 27. (Document in my possession).

18. See footnote 10, this chapter.

19. Outgoing electrical message, "US -Thai Relations and Your Visit to Bangkok," U.S. Embassy Bangkok, Thailand, 0808Z, 31 January 1973. (Document in my possession). The Vice-President was sent the message in preparation for his stop in the Thai capital.

20. Outgoing electrical message, "Thai SGU Future," U.S. Embassy Bangkok, Thailand, 0329Z, 17 February 1973. (Document in my possession).

21. Electrical message, "US-Thai Relations and Your Visit to Bangkok."
22. Electrical message, "Thai SGU Future."
23. Outgoing electrical message, "Thai SGU," SECSTATE WASHDC, 2152Z, 7 April 1973. (Document in my possession).
24. Outgoing electrical messages, "Thai SGU," AFSSO Udorn RTAFB, Thailand, 1030Z, 1 March 1973, and "Thai SGU," DEPCHJUSMAG Udorn RTAFB, Thailand, 0915Z, 8 March 1973. (Documents in my possession).
25. Outgoing electrical message, "Thai SGU: New Funds Required," SECSTATE WASHDC, 0629Z, 19 April 1973. (Retransmittal of electrical message sent 19 April from U.S. Embassy Vientiane). (Document in my possession).
26. Outgoing electrical message, "Thai SGU," SECDEF WASHDC, 2154Z, 28 June 1973. (Document in my possession). See also Bangkok Post, 18 September 1973.
27. U.S., Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam: April 1973, 13-5. Since Fiscal Year 1973 all military funding for Laos was included in the Defense Department budget. The DOD then transferred money for the Thai and Lao irregulars to the CIA, which physically disbursed the payments. Beginning in Fiscal Year 1974 the money was no longer transferred from the DOD to CIA budget, but CIA case officers continued to make the field payments. U.S., Fiscal Year 1974, 5887-8.
28. DEPCHIEF Memorandums for Record, "Visit to Long Tieng on 20 March 1973," 26 March 1973, Udorn, Thailand, and "Visit to

Long Tieng on 21 June 1973," 26 June 1973. (Documents in my possession). General Trefry had succeeded General Vessey in late February 1973.

29. Lee, "Minority Policies and the Hmong," 203, and my interview with Vang Pao, 6 February 1979.

30. DEPCHIEF Memorandum from Brigadier General Vessey to Ambassador Godley, "Organization for Post Cease-fire U.S. Military Assistance to Laos," 14 February 1973, Udorn, Thailand. (Document in my possession).

31. Blaufarb, "Unconventional War in Laos," 63-4.

32. DEPCHIEF Memorandum, "Organization for Post Cease-fire U.S. Military Assistance to Laos."

33. DEPCHIEF Memorandum, "Meeting Concerning Reorganization of the Laotian Attache Office, RO, Project 404, and DEPCH," 20 February 1973, Udorn, Thailand. (Document in my possession).

34. My interview with Lieutenant General Richard G. Trefry, U.S. Army, retired, Alexandria, Virginia, 19 May 1989. Lao Major General Oudone Sananikone has suggested that an overhaul of the Lao military supply system would have upset the financial interests of many powerful Lao families. Sananikone, The Royal Lao Army, 161.

35. My interview with Trefry, 19 May 1989, and outgoing electrical message, "SGU and FY74 Air Services Contracts - Laos," CINCPAC, Hawaii, 0504Z, 4 July 1973. (Document in my possession). The State Department message was 2217Z, 8 March

1973, with a State Department assigned number of 060000. The message was commonly known as "SECSTATE 60,000."

36. My interview with Trefry, 19 May 1989.

37. In contrast to previous ambassadors to Laos, Whitehouse was immediately at ease with the U.S. military. He and General Trefry enjoyed a very warm relationship in the midst of Washington's somewhat conflicting political and military guidance. My interview with Ambassador Charles S. Whitehouse, Washington, D.C., 24 May 1989. At the time of the interview Whitehouse was an Assistant Secretary of Defense responsible for Special Operations.

38. St. Jean, McClain, and Hartwig, "Twenty-Three Years of Military Assistance to Laos," 62 and Department of Defense. "CINCPAC Command History, 1973," (Camp Smith, Hawaii: Office of the Command Historian, 1973) 58. (Document in my possession).

39. Dommen, Keystone of Indochina, 98.

40. Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 108-9.

41. Ibid., 107.

42. Joseph J. Zasloff and MacAlister Brown, eds., Communism in Indochina (Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1975) 265.

43. Outgoing electrical message, "Withdrawal of Thai Forces from Laos" U.S. Embassy Vientiane, Laos, 1055Z, 22 May 1974. (Document in my possession). See also Bangkok Post, 22 May 1974.

44. St. Jean, McClain, and Hartwig, "Twenty-Three Years of Military Assistance to Laos," 66.

45. According to a senior Hmong official in the Souvanna government, Souvanna later told the French Ambassador to Laos that "the Hmong had served his purpose well, but it was a pity that peace in the country had to be achieved at the expense of their extinction." Lee, "Minority Policies and the Hmong," 204-5.

46. Ibid., and my interview with Moua Thong, San Diego, California, 6 November 1979. Moua Thong was the manager of the Long Tieng radio station.

47. Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 118.

48. Department of Defense. "CINCPAC Command History, 1975," (Camp Smith, Hawaii: Office of the Command Historian, 1975) 616-7, and my interview with Major Anthony J. Litvinas, U.S. Army, Honolulu, Hawaii, 20 February 1991. Major Litvinas' father, Clement P. Litvinas, worked for the U.S. Federal Highway Administration in Savanakheth and "negotiated" with the students. Mr. Litvinas convinced the revolutionaries to sign receipts for all the U.S. equipment they seized.

49. Department of the Air Force. "PACAF Command History, July-December, 1974-5," (Hickam AFB, Hawaii: Office of PACAF History, 1975) 475, and Department of Defense, "CINCPAC Command History, 1973," 58. The former USAID compound in Vientiane is now office space for the Council of Ministers. In August and September of 1990 I conducted a number of

interviews in the main building. The offices are still furnished with U.S. Government Issue desks, chairs, and file cabinets.

50. "CINCPAC Command History, 1975," 619-20.

51. Ibid., 41, and 621.

52. Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, 119.

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSIONS ON A "NON-ATTRIBUTABLE" WAR: SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

The American military aid program in Laos began as an adjunct to other U.S. security initiatives in the region. Rejecting the 1954 Geneva settlement as inadequate to preclude Communist aggression in Southeast Asia, the Eisenhower administration orchestrated the creation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. When the United States succeeded the French in training the South Vietnamese armed forces, America also began providing military assistance to the French Military Mission in Laos. America's "can do" spirit was, however, inconsistent with the lax French colonial work ethic and the U.S. moved immediately take charge of Lao military training.

Initial U.S. efforts at Lao military assistance, which began in 1955, fell miserably short. The Program Evaluations Office, afflicted by a staff of military retirees and former and would be military personnel, lacked direction, experienced great difficulty with the French military, and was hampered by a convoluted Lao political situation. Nevertheless, Washington allowed the PEO to muddle along for more than three years before deciding that the program required the attention of a senior active duty military officer. The February 1959 arrival of Brigadier General Heintges signalled Washington's decision to begin a full-fledged military aid program and,

therefore, an even greater departure from the 1954 agreements.

Although it was not planned, General Heintges' assignment coincided with Prime Minister Phoui Sananikone's announcement that the Royal Lao government viewed the 1954 Geneva agreements as fully implemented. This declaration, and the recent replacement of Pathet Lao cabinet members by right-wing army officers, touched off increased military contact between the Pathet Lao and the Lao army. The FAR acquitted itself in its normal desultory fashion, evidence that the PEO had accomplished little, and the Phoui government publicly requested greater U.S. military aid.

Washington quickly responded to the Lao request and Heintges soon had several hundred U.S. Army Special Forces trainers and Filipino contract technicians assigned to the PEO. Still, the arrival of these additional personnel and an increased budget did not markedly improve the fighting capabilities of the Royal Lao Army. The "Green Berets" were frustrated by the short length of their tours in Laos and the refusal of Lao officers to take part in any training programs. And, while the integration of Filipino technicians into the Lao military seemed expedient at the time, it inculcated a reliance on foreigners which stifled later efforts to make the Lao Armed Forces more self-sufficient.

The expanded American presence in Laos brought about an enormous amount of graft and malfeasance within the royal government. Pathet Lao propagandists rightly pointed to

suddenly wealthy civil servants, while the Lao people awaited promised roads, schools, and clinics. The Lao Army's enlisted force was also exploited by officers who often short changed the pay and food rations of their men and sold newly arrived U.S. military equipment. A genuine, but naive attempt by Captain Kong Le to redress these injustices and end foreign influence in his country elevated the Laotian civil war into a superpower confrontation.

Kong Le's 1960 coup and the installation of Souvanna Phouma as prime minister was immediately and firmly opposed by the United States and Thailand. Since the 1954 signing of the Manila Pact, Washington and Bangkok had been united in their efforts to oppose the inclusion of the Pathet Lao in any Lao coalition government. This anti-Communist fervor caused the United States and Thailand to overlook the copious shortcomings of General Phoumi's military leadership and his financial misdeeds, while precipitously dismissing anyone who considered involving the Pathet Lao in a political settlement.

The Thai blockade of Vientiane, the suspension of American military aid to Souvanna's government, and blatant PEO assistance to General Phoumi's forces only exacerbated the situation. For five years the U.S. had enjoyed the advantage of resupplying the Lao military by air transport and overland shipment through Thailand. Communist bloc support for the Pathet Lao, however, had to make its way into Laos via time consuming convoys from China and North Vietnam. When Souvanna

countered these actions by accepting Soviet military aid he dramatically balanced the military assistance scales.

Suddenly, the United States and a new president were faced with an unprecedented Soviet airlift and the realization that the Russians had decided to test America's resolve in Southeast Asia. The Laotian crisis, escalating in the first days and months of the Kennedy administration, threatened to undercut the young president's international credibility, his foreign policy agenda, and force the United States into a war with the Soviets. Kennedy insisted that he would not be "humiliated" by the Soviets, but the president and his advisors knew enough about the land and people of Laos to decide that the United States should avoid, if possible, a conventional war in Laos. The White House decided to pursue a strategy of tough military "signalling" to the Soviets while expanding the Lao military assistance program and ordering the development of a secret and unconventional military force in Laos.

While earlier U.S. military assistance efforts in Laos were kept secret in deference to the 1954 Geneva accords, the aid was mostly focused on the training and support of a conventional army. The Kennedy administration, beginning in 1961, greatly expanded America's Laotian involvement. Since the Royal Lao army had repeatedly shown their ineptitude at warfare, the U.S. simply recruited a group which would fight. Emphasizing the dangers the Communists posed to the Hmong way

of life, the CIA was able to develop a "proxy" army for the lowland Lao. Determined to make Laos a bastion of freedom, Washington chose to ignore the consequences of supporting a government unwilling to shed blood in its own defense. Although diplomatic maneuvering would prompt a brief respite in U.S. military activity, America's covert Lao war policy was set.

The 1962 Geneva agreements allowed the United States and the Soviet Union to back away from military confrontation, but the diplomats did little to solve the Lao kingdom's security concerns. President Kennedy, despite the knowledge that North Vietnamese forces remained in Laos, complied with the Geneva terms and ordered a complete withdrawal from Laos of the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group. The president acted at the urging of Ambassador W. Averell Harriman, who firmly believed the Soviets could ensure North Vietnamese adherence to the accords. Harriman's faith was misplaced and, perhaps, the Kremlin truly misjudged its sway over Hanoi. In any case, Ho Chi Minh never had any intention of abandoning his Laotian highway to South Vietnam.

In addition to Harriman's Soviet "guarantee," there was also a State Department judgment that Hanoi's forces would be circumspect in their violations of Laotian neutrality. This is a critical point in understanding America's Lao policy. Because the North Vietnamese were transitting Laos en route to make war in South Vietnam, the White House was now

conceding that American intervention, if necessary, should occur in South Vietnam and not Laos. Additionally, it is clear that the administration believed that as long as the North Vietnamese denied their presence in Laos, the U.S. could also undertake "non-attributable" military action in the kingdom without fear of international condemnation. Accordingly, Washington could then move its focus to Vietnam where, administration experts predicted, the U.S. could more easily defend the region against Communist expansion.

The CIA experienced little difficulty in implementing this covert war policy. Vang Pao and his Hmong clans, threatened off their mountains by continuing communist pressure and being unwelcome in the lowlands, had little choice but to fight. Air America's experienced pilots and unmatched repair facilities promised professional and durable air support. Once USAID was directed by the president to assist the CIA with refugee relief and "cover" for agency operatives, the team was completed. The training of the lowland Lao army was left to DEPCHIEF and the USAID Requirements Office.

Without Thai air bases and Thai manpower the United States could not have supported a meaningful covert war in Laos. Bangkok, anxious to see the U.S. stem Communism on the distant side of the Mekong, allowed the basing of hundreds of American aircraft (which flew missions over Laos, Cambodia and the Vietnams) and established Headquarters 333 to work in

concert with the CIA. The astute Thais, at no financial cost, were able to gain increased border security and hundreds of millions of dollars in military and economic aid.

The political implications of the U.S. conducting a secret war in a neutral country left no doubt that the American Ambassador to Laos would strictly control the operation. Even though the "Kennedy letter" enunciated the ambassador's authority over the embassy Country Team, the State Department was quite judicious in the selection of its senior Vientiane diplomat. Leonard Unger became the first ambassador to receive the extraordinarily difficult job of publicly proclaiming American adherence to Lao neutrality while secretly directing a prohibited military assistance program. Ambassador Unger was more than equal to the task and was subsequently posted to Bangkok where he continued to be an active participant in arranging Thai support for the Lao war.

Ambassador William Sullivan was the most important and influential man in the twenty year history of America's military assistance program in Laos. For more than four years Sullivan ran the Vientiane Country Team and the Lao war with virtual impunity. His experience in Geneva and support in Washington provided Sullivan with formidable foreign policy insight and political clout. Ambassador Sullivan established himself as the supreme and unquestioned arbiter of all U.S. activities in Laos. His personal attention and involvement

in every aspect of the American Mission insured a smooth and professional operation. Sullivan's flaw was his undisguised distrust of the American military.

Ambassador Sullivan believed that United States policy objectives in Laos dictated a minimal in-country U.S. military presence. As the war heated up in Vietnam, Sullivan was under increasing pressure from the U.S. military command in Saigon to ease these restrictions. The ambassador was correct in refusing to delegate all of his military authority to COMUSMACV. America's pronounced respect for the 1962 Geneva accords would have looked foolish indeed if Laos had been designated a part of COMUSMACV's theater of operations. Nonetheless, Sullivan could have allowed COMUSMACV, through 7/13th Air Force, a much greater role in the direction of the air war. Professional military advice on aerial operations would not have exposed America's true military involvement in Laos and it might have improved the air campaign.

Sullivan's decision to exclude COMUSMACV and 7/13th Air Force from almost all decision-making elevated the military role of the CIA. The CIA, through the ambassador, was able to exercise considerable control over American military air power. As evidenced by the recollections and writings of many senior U.S. Air Force officers, the CIA was not properly trained in the employment of sophisticated bomber aircraft. Also questionable was the agency's direction of Air America and U.S. Air Force helicopters in the insertion and extraction

of large numbers of troops. In defense of the CIA role, William Sullivan and William Colby have both pointed to the agency's long in-country experience as compared to the normal one year U.S. military tour of duty. Still, Sullivan could have directed a closer association between the CIA and 7/13th AF which might have capitalized on the expertise of both organizations. It is obvious the CIA wanted air power on demand, with no outside interference.

Ambassador Sullivan also insisted that DEPCHEIF play a minor role in Lao operations. The USAID Requirements Office was staffed by dedicated, mostly former military men. But the RO, even with the addition of Project 404 personnel, was never able to adequately supervise Lao use of American aid or gauge the effectiveness of the Lao military. The result was sloppy training, abuse of military equipment, opportunities for wholesale malfeasance, and a miserable army. If the DEPCHEIF commander had been given a meaningful place on the embassy Country Team the RO workers and their colleagues in Thailand might well have developed more effective training strategies. Such a collaboration could have led to some real improvement in the Lao military.

The military situation in Laos began to change in the late 1960's. America's covert paramilitary war in Laos was fast becoming a conventional conflict with enormous human and financial costs. The increased aggressiveness of the North Vietnamese dry season campaigns, a new administration in

Washington, and a growing anti-war feeling in the American Congress brought change, albeit slowly, to America's Lao policy.

Ambassador G. McMurtrie Godley, who enjoyed close associations within the CIA, initially retained most of William Sullivan's management policies. The CIA Station Chief continued to serve as the ambassador's principal military advisor and DEPCHIEF and 7/13th AF were largely ignored. As the war in Laos accelerated Godley and his Country Team increasingly found themselves involved in large scale military operations. The Hmong, who for years had effectively served as guerilla fighters, were now regularly employed against sizable North Vietnamese forces. Marginally equipped and poorly suited for conventional combat, the Hmong suffered horrific casualties. The kingdom's defense began to depend almost entirely on massive aerial bombing and the infusion of additional Thai artillery and infantry SGU's. Nevertheless, Godley clung to the policies of the past and allowed his staff to dictate military requirements to a wholly exasperated 7/13th AF and COMUSMACV.

In 1972, after years of effort, the Pentagon was able to convince the State Department that DEPCHIEF required the attention of a general officer. Brigadier General Vessey's performance quickly won Godley's confidence and, for the first time since the October 1961 departure of Major General Tucker, there was a professional military manager in Laos. Vessey's

expertise and recommendations led the way for much improved relations between the U.S. embassy in Vientiane and senior U.S. military officials in Thailand and South Vietnam. Visits to Laos by U.S. general officers, unthinkable in the past, began to occur with some frequency. Increased understanding, on both sides of the Mekong, measurably improved cooperation on military matters.

However, public revelations about the true extent of America's involvement in the kingdom brought about stiff Congressionally mandated reductions in Lao military aid. In late 1972, there was little question that the United States would soon disengage from the war in Vietnam. The U.S. military had "joined" the Vientiane Country Team a little late.

The war in Laos was always in the shadow of Vietnam and when Hanoi and Washington concluded a settlement there was no doubt that the Lao conflict would soon end. Dr. Kissinger's recollections notwithstanding, the Royal Lao government had no choice but to complete a cease-fire agreement with the Pathet Lao. Nevertheless, Prince Souvanna Phouma was not an unwitting victim of American foreign policy. The prince, by late 1964, was fully aware of America's covert Lao ground and air campaigns. For more than eight years Souvanna had accepted, and sometimes requested, U.S. military activity in Laos. During much of this period, the prince also maintained close contact with his brother, Prince Souphanouvong. The

prime minister and Henry Kissinger might well have enjoyed a mutual discussion on Metternich.

The February 1973 Vientiane Agreement stopped U.S. bombing in Laos and, once a new Lao coalition government was formed, mandated the expulsion of Air America and the Thai SGU's. Although there was some hope in Washington that the new Lao government would allow the retention of a small U.S. military assistance program, America's covert war in Laos was at an end.

Over the next year, as the Pathet Lao and the royalists attempted to form a new government, the U.S. continued to supply the Royal Lao Army with military aid. It was a wasted effort. For too many years, with U.S. acquiescence, the Lao military had been content to sit out the war and allow the Americans to pay the Hmong and Thais to defend the kingdom. Now, even with the imminent departure of the U.S. military aid program, there was no sense of urgency. Some senior Lao military officers believed Souvanna and Souphanouvong would come to a compromise and, as before, the Communists would only be part of a new government. Others, reflecting a traditional Lao perspective, were resigned to their fate. The Lao were not, and could never be, "Turks."

The formation of the Lao Provisional Government of National Union resulted in the complete withdrawal by late May 1974 of the remaining Thai SGU's and the departure of all non-accredited U.S. military personnel from Laos. The United

States had fully complied with the Vientiane Agreement, even though President Nixon, like President Kennedy in 1962, knew that the North Vietnamese remained in Laos. Unlike Kennedy, however, Nixon was not thinking about a future U.S. covert return to Laos. On 9 May 1974, the U.S. House Judiciary Committee had opened impeachment hearings on the President of the United States. Regardless of North Vietnamese duplicity, U.S. military involvement in Laos and the rest of Indochina had come to an end.

As the North Vietnamese forces entered Saigon on 30 April 1975 the Pathet Lao knew their victory was also near. Plans for any future U.S. military aid program in Laos completely evaporated and the U.S. embassy in Vientiane was drawn down to a skeleton staff. The U.S. military assistance program in Laos was ended.

From an American foreign policy standpoint, the decision to establish and maintain a covert U.S. military assistance program in Laos must be viewed as a success. After the 1962 Geneva agreements the United States decided the future of Southeast Asia would be settled in Vietnam. Although the United States and North Vietnam both violated the agreements, neither side wanted a full scale war in Laos. Hanoi could have struck at many of the key Laotian river cities, including Luang Prabang. Washington could have ordered American troops inserted into Laos and placed along the Ho Chi Minh trail. The result, in either case, would have been an immediate and

bloody escalation of the war. Both sides refrained from any such precipitous military action and chose to allow the war in Vietnam to settle the conflict in Laos.

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